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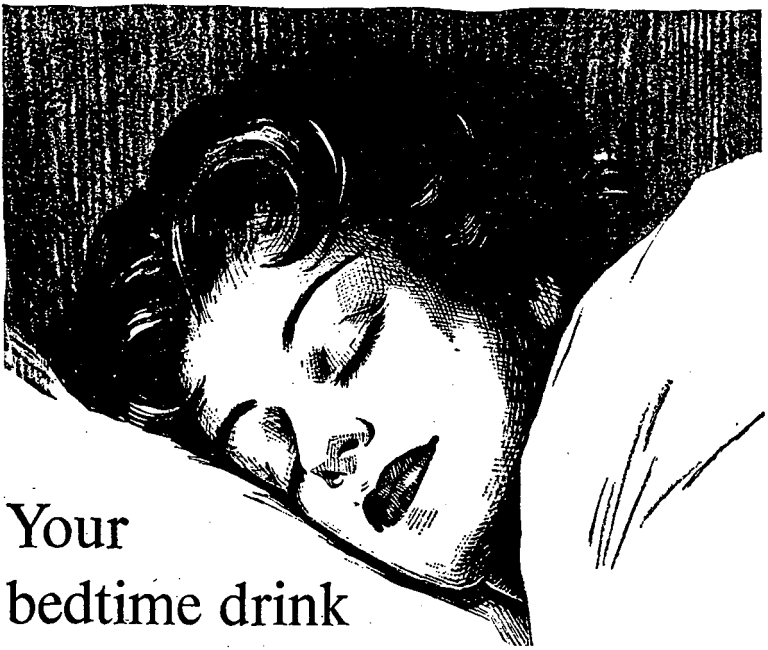

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argosy

Vol. XXII No. 11 **NOVEMBER 1961**

Log Book	*Decorations by Graham*	4
Haunted Waltz	**Arthur Mayse** *Illustration by Michie*	6
The Far Black Mill	**D. Sleightholme**	20
Feast of St Maigret	**Edwin Brock**	29
Under the Hammer	**Georges Simenon** *Illustration by Marçais*	30
Nice Mice	*Decorations by Jennetta Vise*	44
The Rocking Chair	**Sean O'Faolain**	47
Leisure Pleasure 3		50
Brilliant Career	**Arthur Porges** *Illustration by Schwarz*	51
Albacore !	**Tom Filer** *Illustration by Neville Dear*	59
Charity	**John Pudney**	71
The Man Who Saw Red	**John Davies**	77
Twinkle, Twinkle	**Victor Canning** *Illustration by Ian Ribbons*	82
My Hat !	*Decorations by Swavek*	94
The Despoiler	**Peter Steele**	96
Fear is the Key (Third Part)	**Alistair MacLean** *Illustration by Robb*	106
Argosy Crossword		144

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OF COURSE if they are going to teach Judo to cats . . .
The birth of this suspicion was prompted by a recent news item about a task force of cats that (somewhat reminiscent of Dick W.) was sent to an island suffering from a plague of rats off the Japanese coast.

We at once envisaged a lithe, black-belted team of athletes in tiptop condition, primed on the five vital points of rat physiognomy.

They were given, the press report said, a rousing send-off by their masters on the mainland, milk flowed and toasts went round. We could imagine the sorrowing but proud owners fastening on their pets huge false whiskers like the false moustache worn by medieval Japanese warriors to frighten the foe . . .

Judo-trained cats will be useful, very useful; as traffic wardens, or organising rush-hour on the tube, getting rid of coypu in East Anglia, or even—with a smattering of pussycology—teaching P.T. in blackboard-jungle-type schools.

There's something about Judo that seems to go with cathood; two Judo holds, Kime-no-Kata and Katamewaza, sound as if they were invented by cats; while Morote Seoinage, a shoulder-throw with both hands, is a bit reminiscent of the deep morowing threat uttered by one warrior cat when he sees another.

Or consider the Katagatame, of which our Judo manual says "it is pregnant with belligerent possibilities." You're telling us! You put your right arm over your opponent's left shoulder and under his neck, thread your left arm under his right shoulder, clasp your hands, and jam your head against the right side of his neck.

Hey, Momma! De cat done a gatta me!

And then there's something called Hen-O. This, it seems, is adaptation to a situation, in which cats are notoriously well practised.

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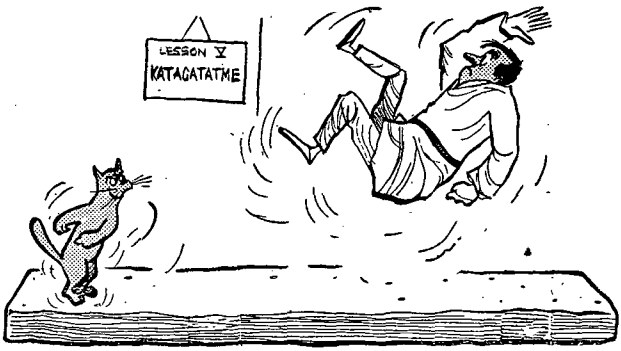


In fact, we can't help worrying a bit about the future of poor old Homo Sapiens—we can't help feeling it won't be long before Judo-trained cats are elbowing him out of his place at the head of the queue for Wimbledon or the Russian Ballet.

The other day in Waterloo Station on an unused poster site we saw, chalked up, the solitary and significant word:

PUSS

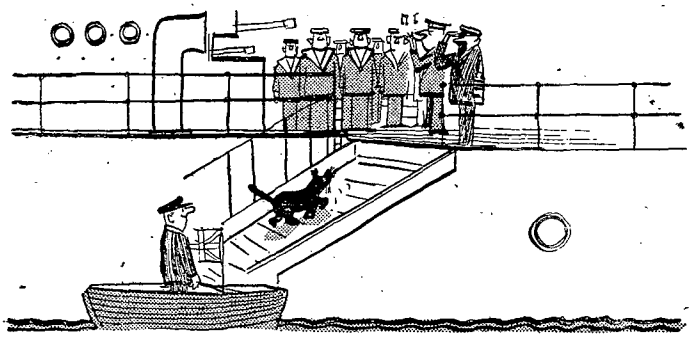
The cataclysm is on its way!

But perhaps, at that, the world will be a more rational place when run by cats.

Hen-O! At least cats can't *read*, so we shall still be sure of a copy of Argosy.

JOHN SILVER

Horatio



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Haunted Waltz

By ARTHUR MAYSE

THE holly crop paid off extra well last winter, so after Christmas we parked the kids with Vera's folks and pointed our noses south, spending New Year in San Francisco, then dropping down to Los Angeles and putting in at Vegas on the way home. Our second night there, we managed to snag a table at the Twin Palms, a high-class spot that featured a dance team called The Belancas. Even though what stepping Vera and I do is pretty well confined to Knoxville Golf and Country Club, we appreciate good dancing when we see it, and I tell you those Belancas were a lot better than just good.

They were into their third number—a tango, but not the kind we learnt from Miss Harper at her School of the Dance—when Vera said to me, "Jim, I know that girl!"

"Honey," I said, "the closest you've been to the Latins is Nick Servos' tamale parlour on Front Street. You couldn't know her."

"I couldn't," Vera said, "but I do." She had set her daiquiri down and was leaning forward with both hands clasping the new evening bag I'd given her, this being a sort of anniversary for us. "Let me think." Her voice climbed, as it does when she's excited. "Yes, of course! Jim, that's Nancy Drummond. You remember her: the gawky girl who used to live with her rich old aunt." Vera was speaking so loud now that people had begun to stare. I shushed her, but it did no good. "And that boy is from Knoxville too. Oh dear, what was his name?"

"Hopper," I told her. "Hopper MacCutcheon." The sideburns and slicked-back hair and fancy Spanish getup changed his looks; but Vera was right. This was the big, clumsy

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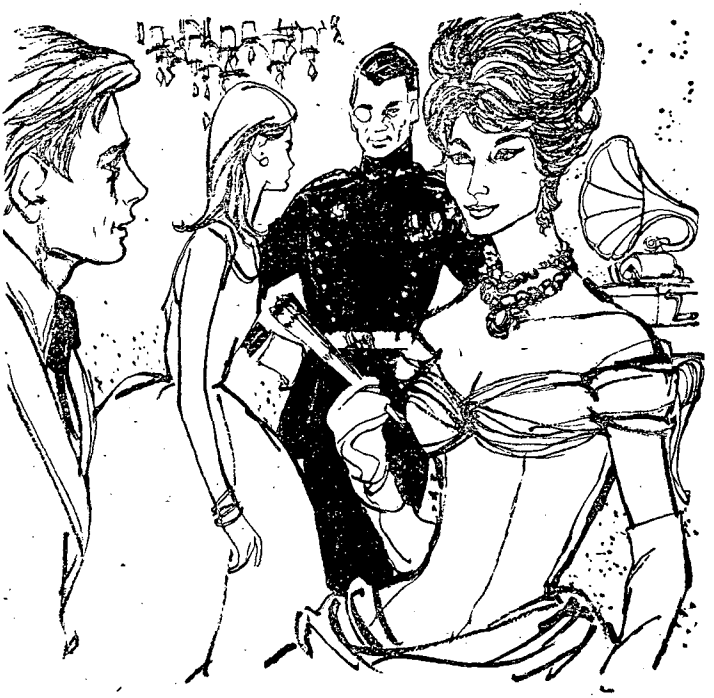

strawhead we'd nicknamed Clodhopper at school, shortening it to Hopper after he beat up several of us, me included.

I looked round for our waitress, feeling the need of a bracer. "Vera," I said to my wife, "there's something almighty funny about this."

"More than funny," Vera said. "It's—it's fantastic. Nan Drummond was the only girl ever to be dropped from Miss Harper's dancing classes. Why, Jim, she was absolutely hopeless! She couldn't do a simple polka without tumbling over her feet."

"She could now, you bet!" I muttered, watching those two in their cone of golden light while I did some remembering on my own account. The one time Hopper MacCutcheon had shown up at a school dance—stag, of course—Vera made the mistake of feeling sorry for him and let him stomp her through a slow foxtrot. She had to junk her new gold sandals and was lame for a week.

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The band lit into a redhot mambo. The way that pair handled it made you want to hop on a chair and holler, " Olé! " I waited till they spun close to our table, then pushed my voice under the music.

" Hopper," I said. " Hey, Hopper."

For a minute I thought we must after all be wrong. But next time round, the girl gave us a quick little smile and the tall fair-haired guy winked at me.

They ran off hand in hand, the spot tagging them. Although I hadn't succeeded in catching the waitress, she showed up with a fresh daiquiri for Vera and a double rye for me.

" Compliments of The Belancas," she told us in a tone that made it plain our rating had gone up a good few points, " and they ask may they join you at your table, Mr. Avery? "

" Tell them we'd be honoured," I said, and meant it.

They showed in about five minutes, in street clothes. I had a queer feeling that they'd shed some sort of magic along with their costumes and make-up, because except for being seven years older and a heck of a lot better dressed, Nancy and Hopper were the same awkward, oddball pair who had dropped out of Knoxville High in their senior year. Nan crunched a fellow's foot as they edged between tables. As she stopped to apologise, Hopper bounced off her hip and spilt the champagne cocktail the fellow's girl was nursing.

The way they looked at us was the same too: as if I was still the big football wheel and Vera the most popular girl in school. Anxious, if you follow me. Not too sure of their welcome.

We brought Nan and Hopper up to date on the hometown news, and learnt they were married with two children, a boy and a girl, the same as us. New York would be their next stop, and their agent was kicking a Hollywood deal around.

It was plain they were big league, headed for the top of the tree.

I'd got to gabbing about our holly farm and was telling Hopper how we keep a flock of geese to take care of the weeds when Vera's curiosity reached flashpoint.

" How on earth," she burst out, " or off it, did you two learn to dance like that? You must have sold your souls to the devil! "

Hopper glanced at his watch, managing at the same time to knock an ashtray off the table. His voice came to us muffled as he scrunched to grope for it.

" Souls," he said, " are a glut on the market these days." He came up with his hair mussed and his tie crooked. " I doubt if you could give one away, much less sell it." He looked at Nan, and the magic that had been on them while they danced seemed

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to touch them again, turning them into a downright handsome couple.

"Very well, darling," Nan said, "tell them if you like. Only don't expect Vera and Jim to believe you."

"Certainly we will!" Vera said.

And, "Oh no, you won't!" Nan answered, with her green-blue eyes smiling.

"How can you believe it," Hopper said quietly, "when we've never been able to ourselves?"

The way they laid it out for us, Nan and Hopper got their feet untangled the same night Vera and I became engaged, which was at the midwinter dance seven years ago exactly. Hopper had meant to go, but felt his courage drain away while he was still jolting along River Road in the farm jeep.

He parked a couple of blocks from Legion Hall and leaned against the jeep in his shiny blue serge suit and thick-soled black shoes. Dance music drifted down to him from the hall; couples were passing the windows, kids he had gone to school half his life with, and he yearned so hard to be among them, one of them, that the wanting dried his mouth. It wasn't just the clumsiness that went with a loose-coupled frame and outsize hands and feet kept him away. His dad was Prophet MacCutcheon, a wild-eyed stump-rancher who raised his family on a diet of belt leather and wrath-to-come.

At eighteen turned, Hopper was too big for the Prophet to push around, and had long ago decided that dancing was no sin. But the twig had been bent. The minute he set foot on that Legion Hall floor, Hopper MacCutcheon would feel his dad's eyes drilling him, and stiffen as if the Prophet's belt was about to crack across his shoulders.

Finally the pull of the music became more than flesh could stand. Hopper trudged down the empty street to the hall, eased round to the back, and climbed the rail of the oldfashioned verandah that boxed the place. Down near the end, deep in the shadows, he spotted a shape which turned out to be Nan Drummond standing on a bench with her arms crossed on a windowsill.

"You, huh?" Hopper greeted her.

"Any law?" Nan came back at him.

Hopper didn't need to ask why she wasn't inside. The girl's aunt was one of those who are happiest when they have a young helpless creature to torment. Other girls wore skirts and sweaters or blouses for school. Nan Drummond, at seventeen, was forced into dresses—frocks, her Aunt Bess called them—the like of which hadn't been seen on mortal back in fifty years. The only

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boys who ever asked Nan to a party were those whose folks owed her aunt money, and at the moment the old miser's account book must have been clear.

"Shove over," Hopper said, and hoisted himself on to the bench beside her.

They peered in at the dancers, Hopper cussing himself for a coward, Nan busy with her own bitter thoughts.

"Nice band," Hopper said once, feeling he ought to make conversation for politeness' sake.

"Shut up," she told him. "I'm watching Jim Avery and Vera Hubbard. Trying to learn how they make those turns."

Hopper watched too, elbow to elbow with Nan at the window. Inside was a world they both longed with all their hearts to be part of. He twisted round towards Nan. The bench jiggled and she hissed, "Careful, you ox!"

"Well," Hopper said, "we owe but one death, as Sir Philip Sidney said, or maybe it was Walter Raleigh. No point in freezing here. You want to go in and stumble around?"

The bench teetered again as Nan faced him. "Gallantly put," she said. "Sir Philip couldn't have done better." She was crying, the tears making her plain face plainer. "Thanks, Hopper. At least I can tell Aunt Bess a boy asked me without his arm being twisted. But will you please look at me? Take a *good* look!"

She flung her pinch-waisted coat wide. What Hopper saw was a frilly white dress that might have been cute, in a quaint way, on a child of eleven.

"A blue sash goes with this little number," Nan said. "The finishing touch. I have it wadded down inside." The tears were flowing faster. "If I let you take me in, do you know what would happen?"

"I can guess," Hopper mumbled.

"In ten minutes," Nan told him in a shaking voice, "ten horrible minutes of tramping your feet and bumping other couples, my stomach, if you'll pardon a word Aunt Bess considers unladylike, would have tied itself in a knot. I'd retreat to the powder room and throw up. So you see . . ."

Their bench, at that point, decided to fight back. It flipped them to the verandah floor. They rolled under the rail in a tangle of arms and legs to land in an inch of January slush.

"So you see why I won't accept," Nan said drearily as Hopper helped her to her feet. She stared at him, soaked and muddy, weeping still. "Oh, Hopper," she sobbed at him. "Clowns like us! Why don't they just take us out and shoot us?"

A long haul from Las Vegas and a feature spot at the Twin

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Palms. Our waitress was beside me in her little red skirt. I ordered, while Vera dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"You poor, poor kids," she said. "How cruel we all were to them, Jim. Believe me, if we'd had the least idea, ever guessed you were out there . . . I'm so glad things have turned out wonderfully for you!"

"It's as well you didn't come out," Hopper said with his farm-boy grin. "I'd probably have picked a fight with Jim and spoilt his suit out of pure meanness. But no one came."

They stood with the music taunting them, the jive of seven years ago, Hopper mad at himself, mad at Nan in her silly dress, at the lucky ones in the hall and the whole uncaring world.

"I'm still asking you to dance," he growled at Nan, and caught her by the wrist and started off with her down the street.

"Let go!" she snapped at him, fighting to set her heels. "Where do you think you're taking me?"

"To a place I know," Hopper told her, "with a damn sight better dance floor than the Legion Hall." He was striding so fast the girl had to trot or be dragged. "And this I promise you," he said as he boosted Nan into the jeep. "No one will bump us there!"

The jeep lacked top and heater, since Prophet MacCutcheon didn't hold with luxury. Hopper endured Nan's shivering till they were several miles out on River Road, then reached an arm and fetched her across the seat to huddle against him.

Dully, as if she didn't much care any more, Nan asked him again, "Where are you taking me?"

Hopper didn't answer till they were past his dad's stump-ranch, off the blacktop and jouncing fast over pot-holed gravel. Then he said, "Did you ever hear of the Altenschloss?"

Nan gave him a sullen, "No."

"It's a log house, a lodge I guess you'd call it, in the woods west of Black Lake. My grandpa bossed the crew that built it in 1911. I happened on it a couple of years ago while I was gathering cascara bark."

"Who owns it?" Nan asked without interest. But she had stopped shivering, and was fixing up her tear-streaked face from her handbag.

"Nobody, now. Count Wilhelm and Countess Maritza von Altenberg used to. He was Austrian, an army type with a monocle and sabre scar. She was Viennese, Grandpa told me. The count carved up a German officer in a duel over her, just about killed him, and they had to skip with only a very few million marks for pin money."

"Romantic," Nan said, applying lipstick as best she could in

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the bouncing jeep. "What a nice comic opera touch you have. So they fled to the woods and lived in a log cabin with a ballroom—happily ever after, no doubt."

"Just for two years," Hopper told her. "They'd have fifty guests at a time, mostly titled. Grandpa used to take them in by sleigh or buckboard. The parties they threw, he said you'd have to see to believe. Dance bands from Seattle. Drinkables by the dozen cases. Caviare and that sandwich spread they make from goose livers. Even when the count and countess were alone in the Altenschloss, life was a ball."

The gravel tongued out from under the tyres. A sideroad bored into a black wall of timber. "Rough from here on," Hopper said, and put the jeep at the tunnel mouth. "'Did I tell you they loved to dance? When I stumbled on the Altenschloss that day, their gramophone was still in the ballroom, the biggest you ever will see, an oldtimer with cylinder records and a morning-glory horn."

He chuckled, steadying Nan with an arm tight around her waist. "So I oiled the gramophone," he said, "swept the floor, and set out to learn to dance with the broom for a partner."

"A pillow's better," Nan said. "It doesn't trip you." Her head stirred against Hopper's shoulder. "Now that you mention it, I do seem to recall something about your gallant Austrian and his Maritza. They went home to Vienna just before the first world war, didn't they? And showed up here again about 1920?"

"Uh huh." Hopper skidded the jeep to a halt, climbed out, and set to with jack and chains. When he swung back in, his suit was muddier and he sucked a skinned knuckle. "They'd lost just about everything. Crossed the Atlantic steerage and come west by day coach. Von Altenberg hoped to find work in the district, but what Knoxville gave them was rotten eggs."

"And tomatoes," Nan said. "My aunt was one of the children who threw them, and how she must have enjoyed it!" She sounded almost interested now. "At least, they still had each other. What happened to them, Hopper?"

"Grandpa took them out to the Altenschloss," Hopper said. He shifted on the seat, frowning into darkness that bent the headlight beams back on themselves. "Look, Nan, maybe I'd better keep my mind on the driving."

Their sideroad dwindled to a trail that dipped into an alder swamp and laboured over a ridge. Brush flogged the jeep sides, the wheels churned unbroken snow. The track branched, then forked again. Twice, Hopper winched the jeep through stretches too tough even for chains and fourwheel drive.

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"You can see why people leave the Altenschloss alone," he said after another half hour of bushwhacking.

"One reason," Nan said. She gave him an uneasy sideglance. "Are you sure there isn't another?"

"You mean the yarn those deer hunters brought out seven years back?" Hopper spared the girl a grin. "What happened, they found the hidden stairs to the count's wine cellar. The shape they were in by midnight, they were ready to see anything you care to name."

Ahead, the woods thinned. Of a sudden Nan jerked erect with her spine gone broomhandle stiff.

"Hopper MacCutcheon," she squalled at him, "you turn this car round and take me out of here! I remember the rest of that story now! I'm not dancing where people have been murdered!"

Hopper made no move to swing the jeep, although there was room and to spare on the wide, winding driveway under the wheels. "Let me tell you something, Nan," he said. "When I step on to that dance floor, something happens that doesn't anywhere else. The music moves out of my head and into my feet. All right, suppose it did end that way? There's not a thing in the Altenschloss to harm you. Just a darn good old wind-up phonograph and the best sprung maple floor in the county."

His arm tightened protectively. "You're not stupid enough to believe in ghosts and stuff like that, are you?"

"Of course not," Nan said. She ran her tongue over dry lips. The jeep was ploughing through wind-drifted snow towards a great log house, lovely as a fairytale or a dream. Snow blanketed the angles and slopes of its roof. Giant icicles hung from carved gables. Moonlight turned the windows to watching eyes as the jeep laboured on to the terrace that fronted the lodge.

But friendly eyes, Nan decided. "All right, Hopper," she said, "if you can take it, I can." Her mouth quirked in a bitter smile. "At least, I might be an improvement on your broom!"

And he—although she didn't tell him this—would be a better partner than a pillow, which was dandy to cry into, but less comforting than a husky blue serge shoulder.

The brass-studded log door creaked open to Hopper's push. "Better stay here," he told Nan, "till I light us some candles."

Waiting, with the frost nipping at ears and nose and her nerves taut as fiddle-strings, Nan heard an owl call from deep in the woods. "*Oh no, no no, oh no!*" the owl seemed to be warning her, and she felt her courage ooze. But deep inside the house, Hopper was whistling.

"This way," he called, his voice booming hollow.

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Nan breathed deep, swallowed twice, and stepped into the Altenschloss.

The ballroom was exactly as Hopper had described it to her. The hardwood floor under her shoes was smoother than any she had ever trod. She saw the huge old phonograph with its morning-glory horn, the candles burning yellow in wall sconces and the dusty wine-red curtains drawn back from tall windows. A chandelier hung by chains from the ceiling. On the floor under it was a cross-shaped splotch, a stain too dark for any shadow.

Nan, guessing what that mark was, allowed herself a shudder. Then she crossed to Hopper with her wet shoes squishing, but never a creak under her feet.

Hopper turned from cranking the phonograph. He said to her, loud and cheerful, "That crystal chandelier used to hold a hundred candles. Grandpa found the count and countess lying under it when he drove in next day with a quarter of beef and a sack of spuds and cabbage. The countess wore a copper-coloured gown with a low neckline and no back at all. Von Altenberg was in the dress uniform of the Black Uhlans. They'd been shot while they were dancing, blasted through the window with a high-powered rifle.

"The sheriff searched everywhere for a German immigrant, a big, scarred guy with a limp, who had been odd-jobbing around the valley. But he'd disappeared the night of the shooting and they never did catch him. People decided it was him the count had crippled in the duel over Maritza, but of course that's just guesswork."

Hopper blew dust from an ancient record. "Grandpa told me the sight of them brought tears to his eyes. Even with a hole in his forehead the count was a mighty fine-looking man, and the Countess Maritza had never looked more beautiful. She died smiling."

He turned to the phonograph. "They could have ended worse," he said. "After all, what did they have to look forward to?"

Music, thin and scratchy, seeped into the room. "Blue Danube," Hopper told Nan. "Same record that was on when Grandpa found them." He clumped forward on size twelve feet. His hand splayed against the small of Nan's back, large, warm, and reassuring.

"O.K.," he said, "latch on." His left foot thumped heavily. "Let's try to hop off on the big beat."

The floor shone, the prisms of the chandelier caught the light and shattered it in diamond twinkles. They moved in a mist of

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moonlight and candleglow, to the Blue Danube and their own loud breathing and the scuff and shuffle of their shoes.

"Loosen up, will you?" Hopper said crossly in Nan's ear. "You're stiff as a mummy."

She snapped back at him through set teeth, "Lead with your left foot, dope."

They tackled a turn and it came off, after a fashion.

"Listen," Hopper said, "you're all swelled out like a pouter pigeon. Why don't you haul that sash out and put it on? I could get a proper hold on you, your dress wouldn't slither."

Nan obliged. They resumed, becoming bolder, attempting variations they would never have dared in Legion Hall.

"Hopper," Nan said, "I do believe you're right! It's different here. The music *does* get into one's feet!"

"Sure," Hopper grunted. "But how do we break out of progressive? Tell me before we crash the wall."

They pulled off several waltz boxes without stumbling, a series of left turns and an almost-creditable hesitation. Hopper was screwing up his nerve for a shot at a conversation step when he saw Nan's lips part and her eyes open wider and wider until the whites showed. At the same time her fingers dug at his collarbone and her other hand gripped his in a clutch gone clammy.

"Take it easy," he told her. "It's only the grandfather clock in the hall." Except it did seem odd to him that the clock should be chiming like that, spaced and solemn, when the deerhunting vandals of seven years ago had riddled it with .30-.30 slugs.

He counted twelve strokes, Nan all the time gaping over his shoulder and trying to find a voice. When it came, it was a rusty squeak.

"Hopper. Behind you. It's them." He had a confused impression she was about to climb him like a tree. "It's the count and countess."

"Nan," Hopper said, nape prickling, "you're nuts." He bullied her into a lurching left turn. In his ears as he finished his ragged swing, a light, amused voice made music of its own.

"Wili," it asked, charmingly puzzled, "what is it these children do?"

The answering voice was a man's, clipped and slightly guttural. "Who can say, liebchen? One of the barbarous new American steps, perhaps. It seems vaguely related to the waltz."

They poised under the glittering chandelier on the dark stain which was their heartsblood, arm linked through arm, a tall, scarred, monocled officer in a dress uniform all midnight black and silver, and a slender woman in a coppery ball gown that curved from her hourglass waist in a cascade of looped flounces.

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Her high-piled hair was the bronze of an autumn chrysanthemum, and her eyes under arched flyaway eyebrows were the green-blue of a mountain pond.

And even with his heart pounding sick and slow in his throat and Nan's wet hand crushed in his, Hopper MacCutcheon knew the Countess Maritza, or her technicolor ghost, was the loveliest creature he had seen in all his life.

"What can we do?" Nan breathed at him.

"How would I know?" Hopper croaked. The record should have played itself through long ago, the phonograph spring run down. But the horn was still giving out with Strauss, in fact it had picked up volume and a mellowness he wouldn't have believed possible from the warped old cylinder.

He muttered to Nan, "Maybe if we shifted into progressive. Danced our way to the door." And seconds later, savagely, "Get with it, Nan! For cat's sake, will you let me lead?"

"I can't!" It hit him in an agonised whisper. "Oh, Hopper, I've forgotten the step, I can't do anything but an ordinary polka!"

They joggled to and fro, trapped and helpless. Over the top of Nan's head, Hopper saw the countess smile at her husband.

"Ah, the poor darlings," she said in her voice that was silvery music. "Wili, come. We must introduce ourselves."

They advanced from under the chandelier, the countess' hand light on the count's arm.

"I," she said, "am the late Maritza von Altenberg, and with me is my dear husband, Wilhelm Gustavus Holtzwig-Cassen von Altenberg, Graf und Zee."

The turquoise eyes hinted of laughter, the rich mouth gave name and titles a dancing lilt.

The count bowed from the waist with a soundless click of heels. Hopper ducked his head; Nan, he saw, was bobbing like a goose in a weed patch, doing her darnedest to curtsy.

"And now," the count said briskly, "since you appear to be in error on certain minor points, perhaps you will allow us to repay the honour of this visit with a—shall we say, a demonstration?"

He bowed again with the noiseless heel-click, this time to his wife.

Hopper watched, Nan's hand still in his, both of them enchanted beyond fear. This dance they were witnessing, this waltz in a mist of moon and candlelight, was perfection. It was lovelier than a flight of seagulls, intricately faultless as the courting play of swallows.

At the end, Nan spoke to the countess with her face all aglow.

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"I'd sell my immortal soul," she cried, "and I know Hopper would too, if we could dance like that!"

Maritza von Altenberg smiled at her. The chrysanthemum head nodded. "So? Then, my dear, let us change partners."

This part of it, his waltz with the beautiful ghost, Hopper MacCutcheon could never clearly remember. He only knew he was caught up in that same perfection, one with it and part of it, and that he could have cried like a baby when the music whispered off into silence.

He realised they were standing, the four of them, on the black stain under the chandelier.

"Warm work," the count said. "My man does not seem to be about. Pray excuse me."

He dimmed away, but only for a minute. Then he was standing tall at his wife's side with the monocle screwed into his eye, holding a cobwebbed enormous bottle under his arm and four crystal glasses between spread fingers.

"Pol Roger," he said, and shot the cork so that it set the chandelier pendants tinkling. "Even for a vintage year, Maritza, it has kept its life remarkably."

They waltzed the night away, in the misted light, with vintage champagne to refresh them. Towards dawn, they toasted one another in the last of the magnum.

In a gesture all grace, the countess stooped to up-end her glass beside the bottle. She straightened, gazing at Nan with her smile gone wistful and a brightness in her eyes that might have been tears.

"How sweet," she said through a sigh, "to be jeune fille once more in a pretty white frock with a blue sash, in a warm mortal body. To be dancing with one's first love, and hoping, knowing that after the last waltz . . ." Her words were lost in a blush and a murmuring. Her upward glance at the count was sheer bewitchment; he cleared his throat twice, and spoke a trifle stiffly.

"In friendship," he said, "and to oblige my wife, a romantic as is every Viennese, may I prevail upon you to lend us yourselves for one waltz?" He added with the merest hint of a smile in his cold blue eyes, "I assure you we will return you unharmed."

What took place then, Nan and Hopper could remember hardly at all. Except that they were no longer an awkward stump-ranch boy and a clumsy, lonely girl but two other people: dancers with feet that moved light to the music as drifting leaves, and hearts that glowed with a joy and a hope and an eager yearning they had never felt before.

Far away on River Road, a rooster crowed to the morning star,

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and they were Nan Drummond and Hopper MacCutcheon, waltzing together, themselves again, more or less.

"How marvellously you have improved, mes petits," the countess told them. "But it is always so where love is, or the seeds of love."

"Come, Maritza," the count said. "Our ball ends. A stupid convention, this of cockcrow, but rules are rules and must be obeyed."

"One moment first," the countess said gravely, but with the smile lingering. "There is the matter of two souls deeded to us, Wili."

"Return them," the count told her, with a glance at the greying windows. "Have we become—how is it said in America—mere hucksters?"

"Very well," Maritza von Altenberg agreed. "But allow me one last small pleasure. We shall give each to the other. 'My true love hath my soul and I have his,' as the English poet, Sir Philip Sidney, puts it."

"Heart, dearest," the count corrected her indulgently, his sabre-scarred face turning again to the windows. "Heart, not soul. You're for ever misquoting."

"Heart, soul," his wife said, "it makes no matter." She began to dim out like mist dissolving—eyes, smile, slim body, and chrysanthemum head. Her voice touched them sweetly across a widening distance. "Not to dance for seven more long years, Wili. So stern a penance! But perhaps at the end we shall find our young friends and waltz again."

"And that," Hopper MacCutcheon said, heaving himself up from our table with a lurch that sent a glass rolling, "was that. Nan and I never did go home. We hocked a case of the count's Napoleon brandy to a bootlegger down the line—we knew the von Altenbergs wouldn't mind—and took a bus to Reno and got married."

"And here we are," Nan said brightly. "Hopper, we're almost on. We'd better hurry!"

They blundered off between tables to change for their second show. After a considerable silence, Vera said in a testing voice, "Quite an account, Jim."

"Sure," I said. "One for the book, huh?"

"Dancing with ghosts in a haunted house," Vera said. "I suspect that bottle of champagne was tapped rather earlier than Hopper claims."

"Quiet, darling," I told her, for the music had started, Blue Danube, it was, and The Belancas were waltzing in a circle of

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amber light. At least I guess it was them, although Hopper in the black-and-silver dress uniform and Nan in a copper-coloured ball gown with her hair bronze in the spotlight looked—well, like two other people. But this I was sure of as we watched them dip and whirl and glide like swallows in a mating flight: we'd never seen waltzing to match that before, and wouldn't again.

Vera didn't speak till The Belancas had gone on to their Latin numbers. Then she said, all of a rush, "I don't care, I still won't believe it. Why, Jim, if I did, it would shatter me. I'd be a changed person."

I don't want my wife to change, I like her as she is. So I saw no point in telling Vera how I happened on the Altenschloss while grouse shooting last autumn and found, plunk in the middle of that fine sprung maple floor, on the cross-shaped stain under the chandelier, a Pol Roger bottle, a magnum, and four glasses.

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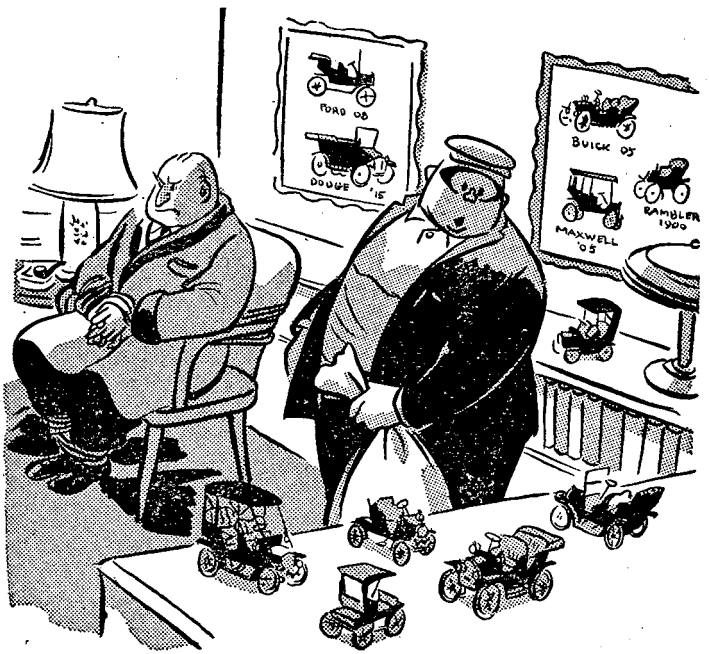
Butch the Burglar



"You haven't any kiddies? You mean they're YOUR toys?"

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THE FAR BLACK MILL

BY D. SLEIGHTHOLME

AT THE foot of the hill he paused to rest; his seaboots were hot from the long walk and although he was young he felt weary. He knelt in the ripe grass and then lay all his length.

He'd come a long way for this, long in time as well as distance. Lying asprawl on the earth, he looked up at the ruined windmill which stood on the hilltop with the summer clouds rising behind it like smoke from a bonfire, and he cast his mind back over the twelve years, back to a time when he was eight years old and the mills turned on their hills and people lived in their shadows.

He could remember how he used to lie where he now lay watching the late afternoon shadows of the mill sails come rushing down, rippling over the hillside, stroking his eyes as they passed over him. He had loved the mill—it stood between him and the black west wind.

Beyond the hill and the next valley the ground rose up in a black, bleak place where the thorn bushes grew twisted and the grass straggled like grey hair; the other mill had stood there—the black mill. He could remember it standing timelessly against the yellow sunsets that came before the wind; and to the eye of a child it had looked like a great black insect, sails crawling over the sky—an insect impaled upon a thorn.

The fear was something which had its beginnings in the fragmentary recollections of babyhood. There would be the night wind in the chimney and the candle flame growing tall in the draught, fluttering like a moth in a web. All the dark hillside would be whispering, and the child deep in his cot would stare round-eyed at his mother's long shadow, up the wall and stooping across the gabled ceiling.

"Hush," his mother would whisper. "Listen to the west wind, my little; listen to Mr. Blow and go quickly to sleep, and who knows," she would say softly, "tonight he may come."

In the darkness afterwards he would hear the ivy on the

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window and the yard door slamming, and he would picture the mile-long stalking figure of the wind, of Mr. Blow, peering and searching for him, parting the clouds as if they were bushes, striding across the hills with his gaping mouth blowing and the trees bent before him as he searched.

"Is he coming?" the child would ask when the west wind came nosing under the eaves. "Can you hear him? Will he take us away?"

She would press her lips to his ear so that nobody else could hear. "Some wild night maybe, some noisy old night, my darling. You mustn't be afraid of him when he comes—just close your ears and close your eyes . . ."

She would talk to him of that Mr. Blow. "He's wild and warm and strong and yet gentle," she'd say. "He fills your head with laughter and robs you of sense. He rages like a madman, then he falls soft and touches you softly and then you can hold him in your two hands like a bird." As she spoke, her eyes would look through him and beyond him, dreamy-soft, but John would be afraid, thinking of the sky-tall figure and the black mill where the west wind lived.

Even in daylight, when the clouds reeled up from the sea and drew their blue shadows over the hill, he would be afraid and his eyes would stray again and again to the westward and the lonely black mill.

His father would stare from his small high window, and his face would show pale and then dark and then pale as the mill sails went by, and his eyes would be narrow with hate.

SLADE the miller, standing square as a post at the small high window, watched the wagon come up the hill, horses nodding at the pull, shining with August sweat. It turned in at the yard and he went down through the silent mill, down the ladders with the sunlight striping his square face as it chinked through the planking of the mill.

He stood waiting, his eyes on the load. He counted the sacks, and his thin lips, pinkly moist against the flour-whitened face, were set in a grim line.

The carter climbed down.

Slade said, "Ten?"

The carter nodded. "And grits, too. Thank the Corn Law repeal, Mr. Slade. Who'm to sow wheat when there's foreign grain pouring in like an April flood?"

"And him?" Slade jerked his head towards the far mill.

"No better—if that's any comfort to you!"

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Slade's eyes flickered. "The Lord is my comfort, carter; I need none of yours."

The man turned to hide his resentment. He began unloading the sacks. Slade was ever the man to throw the Bible in your teeth. "I wouldn't doubt the Lord is your comfort, Mr. Slade," he said, "but there's nobbut the grain to feed one mill in this parish, and I don't doubt the Lord is yon's comfort too."

"Save your talk. The Lord's name is sacred here. Over there—there's godlessness. Take your talk to him if you will, yon black, laughing blasphemer!"

The carter climbed back on his board when the sacks were off. Slade had not helped him. When the horses were thrusting against their collars, he turned his head, his face contemptuous.

"You said laughing, Mr. Slade? There's them here who'd grow wiser for some laughter!"

When the wagon had gone and the clocking of the wheels was only a faint toy sound from the valley road, Slade turned and went into his silent mill. There was no sound. He passed a hand across his eyes and then lifted them to gaze out over the valley towards the black mill. The midday sun filled the valley with dancing haze, and the shadow of the mill was short and squat at his feet, like the shadow of a bowed man carrying a cross . . .

John had come home from the village as the mill began to turn in the late afternoon breeze which came cool from the west. Before he saw the white wooden cap of his father's mill, he could see the sails arching up from the grass of the hilltop and hear the old familiar wooden clacking rumble.

He walked, playing his old game of trying to blink as the sails sliced up and over, opening his eyes in the brief interval between to see how the hill might look with no mill there at all. Sometimes it was easy to do when the sails turned slowly; at other times he had no desire to know, because then the wind blew strongly from the sea and the coast was rimmed with white and the meadows showed rank after rank of grassy waves, driving inland to break in a mock foam of meadowsweet along the hedgerows—then he had eyes only for the heeling grey towers of ships at sea.

The kitchen door stood open to the yard, and he saw his mother before she heard his footstep. She was at the small mirror which hung from a string above the stone sink. She was staring into it again. The mirror swung in the draught and chimed like ice as it swung, showing her face in light and shadow, full and profile, to and fro, while she stared, while she poked at her strands of greying hair, which had once been new-penny bright. He saw her rubbing her pale lips to make them blush.

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"Mother."

She swung round with a gasp. "Oh, John, you frightened me, and—and I had a fly in my eye!"

Watching her face, watching her eyes in their blue-shadowed hollows, he knew what was to come.

"Johnny—" the eyes searching his—"remember what you used to say, when you used to watch me comb out my hair—remember?"

"I've got the prettiest mama in the whole wide world," John said.

"And still?"

"Yes."

John had his eyes on the mantelpiece as he spoke. Sometimes he would stare at the window or at the flagged floor, sometimes he made himself look up into her eyes—because it seemed to please her. The face of the golden-girl mother which he remembered grew fainter every time he told his lie.

The day cooled. The shadow of the mill went out from the yard and way down the hill, and the breeze grew hard and backed to the west. Within the mill his father still worked. John knew though that the stones were not turning, and he knew why his father remained there. Both the mills were turning, yet there was scarcely work to keep one mill working a full day. The mills faced one another across the valley, turning sail for sail while the light lasted, and neither would stop before the other while there remained light to see.

Later, when it grew full night, the mills would stop. His father would chain the lower sails and leave the mill. When he came into the lamplight his face would still be cast in sullen obstinacy.

Sometimes he would take John on his knee. He would smell of flour and sweat. "I'll tell you about the four winds," he'd say. John would listen in great earnestness. "The north wind is the snow wind and comes in the night, grey as a church roof. The east wind is glittering and steady, and the south wind is faint-hearted and blows in gusts soon to change, but the west wind is the thief, the liar, the devil's wind . . ."

John and his mother ate their supper alone and in silence. John watched her listening to the rumble of the mill and the rush of wind outside. He kept his head bent over his plate and he watched her gauging the weight of the wind, the way she always did with the wind in the west.

The shutters rattled. "Will it blow a gale tonight, Mama?"

"Perhaps," she said, and her eyes were excited, as they always were.

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Some nights, when the wind blew, his father would read to them from the big clasp Bible when the meal was over. There would be his father's voice growling deep, his mother sitting with her eyes on her lap. John would listen. Sometimes his father would raise his eyes from the book and they would be yellow in the reflected lamplight and fixed on the woman, watching the effect of the words he had read. She would never meet his stare.

There was no reading that night. She paced the room, restless as ever, her eyes straying to the mirror when she passed it. Why does she stare and stare at it? John wondered.

He went early to bed that night, and by then the wind had reached its limit—no gale but a black and blundering wind that banged about and drew from the woods under the hill an undertone of the sea, a swaying, deep, coming and going of sound. From his west-facing window he saw the faint blackness of the far hill. The black mill he could no longer see. Neither could his father see it, for scarcely had John got into his bed when there was the shudder of the brake-band from the mill as his father put his weight on it, and soon the sound of the chains which passed round the lowest sail for safety.

His mother came then. The bar of candlelight—and then her upside-down face bending over him.

"John," she said so quietly, "you're sure that I'm—still—"

"Yes, Mother. Still . . . in the whole wide world."

"Prettiest?" The eyes searched fiercely into his own.

"The prettiest," John said.

She fussed at the quilt as though he was still a frightened child. "Sleep, John my little. Don't listen—to anything—tonight."

"Mr. Blow is only the wind, Mama; I'm not afraid of it now. Some day I shall go to sea and I'll not be afraid of the wind. The wind can't steal you away, can he?"

She kissed his cheek, and her eyes shone like wet glass in the candlelight. She went without answering him.

Her kiss remained on his cheek after she'd gone, and with his finger he traced the shape of her lips.

On the landing outside his room there was a cupboard which was never used—only by his mother when nobody was near.

He heard her go to the cupboard. He had waited, knowing that she would go to it. He heard the cupboard door scrape against the brittle wallpaper, heard it close again, heard her make her way downstairs.

Once he had waited, then tiptoed out on to the landing; it had been dark, but a little light came up the staircase, enough for him to see. He had opened the cupboard door. Inside it there had been a bag: a green carpet bag filled tightly with things

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of hers and some of his own so that it bulged round-bellied like the carter's horses.

The night flowed past the house.

John had heard his father go to bed and heard the low murmur of voices in the next room fall silent, but he hadn't slept. The hours swirled past like water around a rock. He heard the ivy outside his window break loose in the wind and fall and hang over the kitchen window, there to tap and tap in the gusts. He coasted on a half dream of ships and mill sails and water, and then he drifted into wakefulness again and lay listening to the sounds, naming each in turn. Squeaking gate, creaking branch in the orchard, tapping of ivy, whistle of wind under the eaves.

Then there was another sound.

When he went to the window he saw that there was a chip of moon speeding through the clouds. It showed him the gate where the mill yard ended.

His mother was standing there with her hair straggling loose under her bonnet, and she was sobbing tonelessly. The green carpet bag was at her feet. She waited, facing the valley, searching the darkness in the way of one who has sustained hope for too long, until the act has become habit.

John saw her take up the bag. She began to retrace her way to the house. Once, just once, she looked back, but nothing, no one was there . . .

It began as any other Sunday morning. The wind had fallen soon after dawn and the air was hushed, and the village bells came over the fields like any Sunday.

Slade made no move to harness the wagon for church. He was standing at the high window, studying the distance, sniffing the air, watching the thunderclouds gathering.

The air was flat. The sound of a barking dog rose from the valley floor, spreading in widening ripples, too clear, too loud. The thunder-heads piled up in great yeasty loaves of cloud, and the distant thunder rumbled like men moving heavy wheels in a loft. Slade waited.

The wind when it came was cold as steel. John, watching from the door saw the black mill grow blacker as the clouds massed above it; the sails, feathered to the wind, jerked once; the white bellies of the poplars along the valley road suddenly gleamed; and then, close at hand, the garden pear tree sighed and swayed as if it would get up and dance like something from a nightmare. The dusty yard was pocked with great raindrops all in an instant, and they fell like beetles, raising little puffs of dust. Then the wind came and the mill sails lurched against their chains.

" Come in, John, come in! "

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His mother, shouting from the kitchen, was staring at the sky. She had grown older in the night; now she had the hard, shining cheekbones of an old woman. John saw only that she had grown old—bitterness, he was too young to recognise.

The rain fell in a drumming torrent of steel wires, and it rose like smoke where the wind caught it.

Slade came down from the mill for the midday meal. The trembling blue flashes of lightning seemed to dance in the room with them, and they ate in silence. The storm rolled overhead and the wind blew fitfully, dying for a while although the thunder still rolled and muttered all round the horizon.

The day wore on into late afternoon, and John went out into the yard. The air was sulphurous and the ground smelt sharp, like leather. His father was in the house, his mother was at the window, still watching the sky. There had been a shaft of sunlight for a while. It had strayed like a finger, and it had been yellow, bright, bright yellow. As he watched, he saw that the sky to the west was darkening again with a spreading purple cloud that reached out with long streamers of blowing vapour.

The wind came again, driving a curtain of rain before it, and it was the west wind black and bad, blowing like galloping horses.

John didn't see what his mother did. He had run to the shelter of the barn and stood watching through a chink in the door. He heard before he saw. He heard the deep, slow rumble of the mill as the brake was lifted, and then he saw the sails begin to sweep round at a rate he'd never imagined possible. He saw her then at the small window, and she was looking to the west and she seemed to be laughing because he could see her shoulders shaking.

Slade had heard and come running. He met her at the steps leading up into the mill, and John heard his loud, angry voice and then his mother speaking jerkily as if she lacked breath.

"You had to choose!" she said. "It had to be you or him. Now let the mills decide; there's no room for the two of you."

The rain in their faces made them squint, and the water ran down their cheeks. His father began to shake her. "Are you mad? In the name of God, woman, what have you *done*? Why?"

"Look!" she said.

The black mill had begun to turn. The three of them watched.

Slade was watching his own mill and his eyes were full of awe. He made no move to run to the top floor where the brake lever was, he knew better than to venture into the runaway mill that filled the air with its thunder and shook like a tree. Then he turned to his wife.

"Why?" he said. The fury was dying in him, only the wonder remained. "I want to know why you'd do this to me?"

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"To him!"

"It was no concern of women."

She laughed in his face "You're weak. You're afraid of him. Think back. Remember our wedding day. Do you remember that? Do you remember how he stood and laughed, looking at me—laughing at you?"

"Be quiet!"

"He was handsome, with his curling black hair, and he looked at me there in my wedding dress, and you let his eyes—"

Slade hit her, and John heard the sound of the blow crisp as a snapping stick.

The gale carried the first of the night far and wide over the whole tree-tossed countryside, and the black mill sank in the darkness, gesturing as it faded from their view. They stood where they were, John watching from the barn.

A mill, as it turns, drives the massive wallower. The wooden spur wheels and tree-thick spindles, strapped with iron, go rumbling, turning the clacking damsel which shakes the grain to the grinding stones.

When a mill runs mad and the stones run dry of grain, there come the sparks and the tinder smoulders, grows red and white and bursts yellow in a licking, eager tendril of fire.

John saw it first. He had crept to the sheltering wall of the mill yard. The night was down, but he could still watch the far black mill. He saw a yellow light, square as if behind a window. As the invisible sails went by, the light winked and flashed.

He took no notice. He was watching their own mill and listening to the terrible rumble of overdriven spurs. He knew how a mill could be overturned, how sails could collapse. He was picturing the hundred plants and pegs, spikes and tenons which held together the whole towering structure. His father stood a little way apart. His mother was at the gate.

The yellow light became a blossom, and the blossom turned to red and sent a wide streamer of sparks out over the wind. The sails showed in a sudden flare of light and at the high window something moved. "Mr. Blow," John murmured to himself.

His mother stood watching.

"This is the hand of God!" John told himself. He stared, but there was no more movement at the high window. "Mr. Blow!" John called in a frightened voice.

The fire spread and the hillside became alive with shadows. The time passed and the fire folded over the black mill pouting from windows, lighting the sails which still threshed round, and all the sky became stained with the fire and the bellies of the low clouds writhed as they passed over the mill.

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His father was on his knees in prayer—thanksgiving or forgiveness, nobody would know. John went to his mother.

The mill fell as they were watching, and the clouds swallowed its hive of rising sparks and the yellow flames began to sink.

She was laughing again, that odd, jerky laugh. He heard her saying something to herself over and over again. "And when the time is right, I'll come for you. Some wild night I'll come and you'll be waiting—"

"Mama!"

She put an arm around him and drew him so tightly to her that his cheek was pressed painfully against her body. "He promised. He always promised that, John. Well, now let him come. This is his wild night . . ."

As the sky cleared, so the wind veered suddenly and fell to blowing northerly. The squall came up the hillside with a roar like the beating wings of a thousand great birds, and the mill reeled and swung half round as it came down. The dust that stung their faces was like fog. Bounding like a dog across the yard came a millstone.

Slade still knelt.

THE young man John got to his feet. He began to walk. He skirted the base of the hill, never turning his eyes to the gaunt wreckage which stood on the summit. It held nothing for him now, and only crows and rabbits lived there. His eyes were on the far side of the valley and he quickened his pace.

The grass grew long like long grey hair and the bushes were wind-bent and black. As he climbed the slope he looked upwards to the skyline where the west wind rippled in the grass.

The timbers were tumbled in a blackened pile. He saw how the millwheels had taken the rosy stain of fire and the iron bands had twisted off the great black wheels. There was nothing to fear there. The place of the west wind was a lonely, forgotten heap of cold embers where the wind played.

"Mr. Blow," he called.

A kestrel, sailing overhead, cried once.

Stooping, he picked up a metal object from the old ashes. It was the handle of a travelling bag, a leather bag such as a man might leave ready for a journey.

The west wind tousled the black, curly head of the man who stood on the hill.

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THE OTHER CHEEK

Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.

OSCAR WILDE

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Feast of St Maigret

Always, in some sidestreet off the Rue Morgue
someone has been murdered; the bodies found
by someone unsuspecting—just like you—and,
just as you would do,
the gendarmes have been called. Squat, pipe-
smoking from
the Judiciaire, comes someone who knows everything
we do,
who takes his time in questioning, finds motive
in a single fact,
explaining it to me and you. It's strange but,
after that first page,
we do not care about the man who died, are
not concerned
to find his murderer, but only want to watch
and listen to
this man who understands us all. Perhaps it's
only in some
quiet moment, when, for once, we are the villain
or the one who died,
and, because of this, see this one face to face
we realise
that, had God been on our side, we could have
been just such
a man: martyred by facts, referring answers to
their proper place.

EDWIN BROCK

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Under the

Continuing our series of new stories featuring the inimitable Maigret

MAIGRET pushed away his plate, got up from the table, grunted, shook himself, went over to the stove, and raised the lid mechanically.

"Well, now, let's get to work. We're going to be in bed early."

And the others, sitting around the big table in the inn, looked at him with resignation. Frédéric Michaux, the proprietor, three days' stubble on his chin, was the first to get up and move to the bar. "What'll you—?"

"No," cried Maigret. "No more. We've had enough. White wine, calvados, more wine and—"

They had all reached that stage of weariness where one's eyes smart and one's whole body aches. Julia, who passed for Frédéric's wife, went into the kitchen with a platter that bore the congealed remains of a dish of baked beans. Thérèse, the servant girl, wiped her eyes, but not because she was crying: she had a cold in the head.

"Where do we go back to?" she asked. "Where I've cleared away?"

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Hammer

By GEORGES SIMENON

" It's eight o'clock now, so we pick it up from eight o'clock in the evening."

" Then I'll bring the tablecloth and the cards."

It was hot in the inn, too hot in fact, but outside the wind was driving gusts of icy rain through the darkness.

" Nicholas, you sit where you were last night. Monsieur Groux, you hadn't yet arrived."

" It was when I heard Groux's footsteps outside," the innkeeper interrupted, " that I said to Thérèse, ' Put the cards out. ' "

" Have I got to pretend to come in all over again? " groaned Groux, a six-foot farmer, solid as a kitchen dresser.

You would have thought they were actors rehearsing a play for the twentieth time—their minds blank, their gestures limp, their eyes vacant. Maigret himself, in his role of stage manager, had some difficulty in believing it was all real. Even the place itself—imagine spending three days in an inn miles from the nearest village, in the middle of the fens of the Vendée!

The place was called Pont-du-Grau, and there was in fact a

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bridge, a long wooden bridge over a sort or muddy canal, filled twice a day by the tide. But the sea could not be seen: all there was to see was fenland, crisscrossed by ditches, and far away on the horizon flat roofs, farms—called " cabins " in these parts.

Why this inn here by the roadside? For sportsmen after duck and plover? There was a red-painted petrol pump in the yard, and on the gable end there was a big blue advertisement for a brand of chocolate.

On the other side of the bridge, a hovel—nothing more than a rabbit hutch—the home of old Nicholas, who was an eel-fisher. Three hundred yards away, quite a big farm, with long single-storey buildings: Groux's place.

January 15th . . . 1 p.m. sharp at the place known as La Mulatière, sale by auction . . . farm, 30 hectares, equipment and stock . . . farm machinery, furniture, china . . . The transaction will be by cash.

That is how it had all started. For years life at the inn had been the same every evening. Old Nicholas would arrive, always half drunk, and before he settled down with his pint, he would go over for a drink at the bar. Then Groux would arrive from his farm. Thérèse would spread a red cloth on the table, and bring the cards and the counters. They still had to wait for the excise man to make the fourth; if he didn't turn up, Julia took his place.

Now, on the 14th, the eve of the sale, there were two other customers, farmers who had come from farther away—one of them a man called Borchain, from near Angoulême, the other a certain Canut, from Saint Jean-d'Angély.

" Just a minute," said Maigret, as the innkeeper was about to shuffle the cards. " Borchain went to bed before eight o'clock—that's to say, straight after his supper. Who was it who took him to his room? "

" I did," Frédéric answered.

" He'd been drinking? "

" Not too much. A little, of course. He asked me who the chap was who looked so glum, and I told him it was Groux, the man whose property was going to be sold . . . Then he asked me how Groux had come to fail with such good land, and I—"

" That's enough of that," Groux groaned. The big fellow was in a gloomy mood. He refused to admit that he had never looked after his land and his beasts, and he blamed fate for his failure.

" All right! By that time who had seen his wallet? "

"All of us. He had taken it out of his pocket during the meal to show us a photograph of his wife . . . so we saw it was full of notes. Even if we hadn't seen them we would have known, as he had come with the intention of buying, and the sale had been advertised as a cash one."

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"Same thing for you, Canut? You, too, had over a hundred thousand francs on you?"

"A hundred and fifty. I did not mean to go any higher . . ."

Ever since his arrival there Maigret, who was at that time in charge of the flying squad at Nantes, had been studying Frédéric Michaux thoughtfully. Michaux, who was about forty-five, hardly looked like a country innkeeper, with his boxer's jersey and his broken nose.

"Tell me, don't you have the feeling we've seen one another before somewhere?"

"It's not worth beating about the bush—you're quite right, Inspector. But I'm going straight now."

Loitering with intent in the Ternes district of Paris, assault and battery, illegal bets, slot machines . . . In short, Frédéric Michaux, innkeeper at Pont-du-Grau in the depths of the Vendée, was better known to the police under the name of Fred the Boxer.

"You'll recognise Julia, too, no doubt . . . You put the two of us away ten years ago. But you can see she's a respectable woman now . . ."

It was true. Bloated and flabby, blowsy, her hair greasy, shuffling back and forth between kitchen and dining-room, Julia in no way resembled the girl of the Place des Ternes, and, what was more unexpected, she was a first-class cook.

"We brought Thérèse with us. She's an orphanage kid."

Eighteen years old, slim and tall, with a sharp nose and a funny little mouth, and a bold stare.

"Have we got to play in earnest?" asked the excise man, whose name was Gentil.

"Play as you did then. You, Canut, why haven't you gone to bed?"

"I was watching the game," the farmer muttered.

"Or, rather, he kept running after me," snapped Thérèse, "making me promise to go to his room afterwards."

Maigret noted that Fred threw a black look at the man, and that Julia was watching Fred.

Good, they were all in their places. And the other night it had been raining, too. Borchain's room was on the ground floor, at the far end of the passage. In that corridor there were three doors: one that led into the kitchen, another that opened on to the cellar stairs, and a third numbered 100.

Maigret sighed and ran his hand wearily over his brow. In the three days he had been there, the smell of the place had been soaking into him, the atmosphere clung to his skin until it sickened him. And yet what else could he do?

A little before midnight on the 14th, while the card game was

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going on quietly, Fred had sniffed once or twice, and shouted to Julia in the kitchen, " Is there something burning on the stove? "

He had got up and opened the door into the passage.

" Heavens, it reeks of burning out here! "

Groux had followed him, and Thérèse, too. It was coming from Borchain's room. He had banged on the door, then he had opened it, for it had no lock.

It was the mattress that was smouldering, a wool mattress, which gave off an acrid fatty smell. On the bed, in shirt and drawers, Borchain lay stretched out, his skull smashed in.

Then the telephone. At one in the morning Maigret had been roused. By four he was arriving, in the middle of a downpour, his nose red with cold, his hands frozen.

Borchain's wallet had disappeared. The window of the room was closed. No one could have come in from outside, for Michaux had a disagreeable Alsatian dog.

Impossible to arrest them all. They were all under suspicion, except Canut, the only one who had not left the inn parlour the whole evening.

" Come, now, my friends! I'm listening to you, and I'm watching . . . Do exactly what you did at this time on the 14th."

The sale had been postponed to a later date. All day on the 15th people had been passing up and down in front of the house, whose doors the inspector had had closed.

Now it was the 16th. Maigret had hardly left the room, except to get a few hours' sleep. The same for the rest of them. They were sick to death of seeing each other from morning to night, of hearing the same questions over and over again, of going through the same actions time after time.

Julia was cooking. The rest of the world was forgotten. It was hard to realise that there were people in other places, in the towns, who were not saying the same things over and over, endlessly. " Let's see . . . I had just cut hearts . . . Groux threw down his hand, saying: ' It's not worth playing . . . I haven't a single card . . . Just my luck! ' He got up—"

" Get up, Groux," ordered Maigret, " just as you did that night."

The big man shrugged. " How many more times are you going to send me along that corridor? " he grumbled. " Ask Frédéric—ask Nicholas—don't I go along there at least twice most evenings? Eh? What do you think I do with the four or five bottles of white wine I drink during the day? "

He spat, and went towards the door, slouched along the passage, and banged open the door marked 100 with his fist. " There! Have I got to stay here, at this time of night? "

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" As long as necessary, yes . . . Now, what did the rest of you do while he was out? "

The excise man laughed nervously at Groux's show of temper, and his laughter sounded forced. He was the least tough of them all. It was as if his nerves were too near the surface.

" I said to Gentil and Nicholas that no good would come of it," said Fred.

" No good would come of what? "

" Groux and his farm . . . He never really believed the sale would take place. He was sure he would find some way to borrow the money . . . When they came to put up the notice he threatened the bailiff with his gun. At his age, when you've always been your own master, it's not easy to go back to being somebody else's farmhand . . ."

Groux had come back without a word and was looking at them balefully.

" Now what? " he shouted. " Have you got it all fixed? Was it me who killed him and set fire to the mattress? Say so now, and chuck me into prison! Having got this far . . ."

" Where were you, Julia? " Maigret asked. " It seems to me you're not where you should be . . ."

" I was cleaning the vegetables in the kitchen. We were expecting a lot of people to lunch because of the sale. I had ordered two gigots, and we've only just finished one of them now . . ."

"And you, Thérèse? "

" I went up to my room . . ."

" When, exactly? "

"A little after Monsieur Groux came back . . ."

"All right, we'll go up together. The rest of you carry on—you started playing again? "

" Not right away: Groux didn't want to. We talked . . . I went to get a packet of cigarettes from the bar."

" Come along, Thérèse . . ."

The room where Borchain had died was certainly strategically placed. The staircase was barely six feet away, so Thérèse could have . . .

A narrow room, an iron bed, clothes and underwear on a chair.

" What did you come up for? "

" To write."

" To write what?"

" That we certainly wouldn't have a moment alone together the next day . . ." She was looking him straight in the eye, defiantly. " You know very well what I'm talking about—I could tell from

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QUALITY

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Victor Canning
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■

APPEAR
IN
ARGOSY

the looks you gave me and from your questions . . . The old woman suspects something. She's always on top of us. I begged Fred to take me away, and we had made up our minds to clear off in the spring . . ."

"Why the spring?"

"I don't know—Fred fixed the date. We were to go to Panama, where he once lived, and open a bistro . . ."

"How long did you stay in your room?"

"Not long. I heard the old woman coming upstairs. She asked me what I was doing. I answered, 'Nothing.' She hates me and I hate her—I'd swear she suspected what we were planning . . ."

And Thérèse returned Maigret's gaze. She was a girl who knew what she wanted, and she wanted it badly.

"You don't think Julia would rather see Fred in prison than have him go off with you?"

"She's capable of it!"

"What was she going to her room for?"

"To take off her corset. She has to wear a rubber one to keep what's left of her figure . . ."

Thérèse's pointed teeth reminded him of some small animal; she had the same unfeeling cruelty. Her lips curled as she spoke of the woman who had preceded her in Fred's affections.

"In the evenings, especially when she has eaten too much—

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it's revolting how she stuffs herself!—her corset kills her, and she goes upstairs to take it off . . ."

"How long did she stay?"

"Maybe ten minutes. When she came down again I helped her with the vegetables. The others were still playing cards . . ."

"The door was open between the kitchen and the parlour?"

"It's always open."

Maigret gave her a last look, then tramped heavily down the creaking stairs. From the courtyard came the sound of the dog pulling at its chain.

Just behind the cellar door was a heap of coal, and it was there that the murder weapon had been found—a heavy coal hammer.

No fingerprints. The killer must have picked up the tool with a cloth. Through the rest of the house, including the doorknob of Borchain's room, innumerable blurred prints belonging to all those who were there on the night of the 17th.

As for the wallet, ten of them had looked for it, even in the unlikeliest places—all men accustomed to searches of this kind—and the day before the sanitary department had been called in to drain the cesspool.

The unfortunate Borchain had come from his place to buy Groux's farm. Until then he had been only a farmer; he wanted to become a landowner. He was married and had three daughters. He had had dinner at one of the tables. He had chatted with Canut, who was another prospective buyer. He had shown around his wife's photograph.

Weighed down with too heavy a meal and liberal helpings of drink, he had made for bed, the way country people do when they feel sleep coming on. No doubt he had slipped the wallet under his pillow.

In the inn parlour, four men playing *belote*, as on any other evening, and drinking white wine: Fred, Groux, old Nicholas, whose face turned purplish when he had drunk his fill, and the excise man Gentil, who would have been better off doing his rounds.

Behind them, straddling a chair, Canut, dividing his attention between the cards and Thérèse, in the hope that this night of his away from home would be marked by some adventure.

In the kitchen, two women: Julia and the young girl from the orphanage, at work on a pail of vegetables.

One of these people, at a given moment, went into the passage, on some pretext or other, opened first the cellar door, to take out the coal hammer, and then Borchain's door.

No one had heard anything. It could not have taken long as nobody had noticed any lengthy absence—even though the

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murderer had also to put the wallet in a safe place, for, as the mattress was set on fire, it would not be long before the alarm was given. They would telephone the police, and each of them would be searched.

"When I think," Maigret said plaintively on returning to the parlour, "that you haven't even any decent beer . . ." A glass of cool, frothy beer straight from the barrel . . . instead of these contemptible bottles of so-called family brew.

"How about the game?"

Fred looked at the time on the clock with its sky-blue pottery frame and its advertising slogan. He was used to the police: he was tired, like the others, but rather less strung up.

"Twenty to ten . . . Not started yet. We were still talking. It was you, Nicholas, who wanted more wine?"

"That's possible."

"I called through to Thérèse, 'Go and draw some wine.' Then I got up and went down to the cellar myself."

"Why?"

He paused, then shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, can't be helped. What does it matter if she does hear it, after all? When all this is over, life won't carry on as it was before, anyway . . . I had heard Thérèse go up to her room. I thought she had probably left me a note. It would be put in the keyhole of the cellar door. Do you hear, Julia? I can't help it, old girl. The few happy moments we've spent together have been more than paid for by your endless scenes."

Canut reddened. Only Nicholas sniggered into his ginger whiskers. Monsieur Gentil averted his eyes, for he, too, had often made a pass at Thérèse.

"Was there a note?" Maigret asked.

"Yes. I read it down there while the bottle was filling. All Thérèse said was we probably wouldn't have a moment by ourselves the next day."

Strange, but one sensed real feeling in Fred, and even a totally unexpected depth of emotion . . . In the kitchen Thérèse got up suddenly and came towards the card table.

"Haven't you had enough?" she said, with trembling lips. "I'd rather they arrested us all and put us in prison. It would soon . . . But to go round and round like this, as if—as if . . ." She burst out sobbing, and ran over to bury her head in her arms against the wall.

"So you stayed in the cellar for several minutes?" Maigret went on imperturbably.

"Three or four minutes, yes," Fred replied.

"What did you do with the note?"

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"I burnt it in the candle."

"Are you afraid of Julia?"

Fred strongly resented Maigret's question. "Surely you understand? You who arrested us ten years ago—don't *you* understand that when one's been through a lot together . . . Anyway, have it your own way. Don't you upset yourself, Julia dear."

And a calm voice came from the kitchen: "I'm not upset."

As for motive—the classic motive that all the lectures on criminology stress—each one of these people had a motive. Groux even more than the others, as he was at the end of his tether, about to be sold up the day after, thrown out of house and home without even furniture or belongings, and with no alternative but to hire himself out as a labourer. He knew the house well—the way to the cellar, the coal, the hammer . . .

And Nicholas—an old drunk, certainly, but he was penniless. Although he had a daughter in service at Niort, all her earnings went to the upkeep of her child. So couldn't he have . . .? Besides, as Fred had just said, it was Nicholas who came in each week to chop the wood and break the coal.

Now, at about ten, Nicholas had gone along the passage, zigzagging drunkenly. Gentil had said, "Hope he doesn't mistake the door." It was an extraordinary coincidence: why had Gentil, sitting there, shuffling the cards mechanically, suddenly said that?

And why shouldn't Gentil have had the idea of committing the crime himself when a few moments later he followed in Nicholas' footsteps? Granted he was an excise officer, but everyone knew he didn't take that very seriously: he did his rounds at the café table, and was always ready to come to an arrangement . . .

"Listen, Inspector—" Fred started.

"One moment. It's five past ten. Where had we reached the other night?"

At that Thérèse, who was still sniffling, came and sat down behind Fred, her shoulder touching his back.

"You were sitting there?" Maigret asked.

"Yes. I had finished the vegetables. I took up the sweater I was knitting, but I didn't do any of it . . ."

Julia was still in the kitchen, but she couldn't be seen.

"What was it you wanted to say, Fred?" Maigret asked.

"Just an idea—it seems to me there's one point that proves it wasn't one of us who killed him, because—suppose—No, that's not what I mean . . . If I killed someone in my house, do you think I'd start a fire? What for? To draw attention . . .?"

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Maigret had just filled his pipe, and was taking his time over lighting it. "I think I'll have a calvados, after all, Thérèse," he said. "Now, Fred, why wouldn't you start a fire?"

"Well, because . . ." Fred was struck dumb. "If that fire hadn't started, we wouldn't have worried about the fellow. The others would have gone home . . . and . . ."

Maigret smiled; the stem of his pipe stretched his mouth into an odd grin. "A pity you're proving exactly the opposite of what you wanted to prove, Fred. The start of that fire was the only real clue—it struck me immediately. Suppose you do kill the old man, as you say. Everyone knows he's at your place, so you wouldn't dream of disposing of the body . . . The next morning you will just be compelled to open the door of his room and raise the alarm. When did he in fact ask to be called?"

"Six o'clock. He wanted to go over the farm and the fields before the sale . . ."

"So if the body had been found at six o'clock, there would be no one in the house but you, Julia, and Thérèse—I don't include Monsieur Canut, whom no one would have suspected. Nor would anyone have thought the crime could have been committed during the card game."

Fred was following the Inspector's reasoning carefully, and it seemed to Maigret that he had grown paler. He even tore a playing-card absently into bits and dropped the pieces on the floor.

"Look what you're doing! Next time you try to play, you'll have a hard time finding the ace of spades. What was I saying? Ah, yes. How could one make sure the crime was discovered before the departure of Groux, Nicholas, and Monsieur Gentil, so that suspicion might fall on them? No reason for going into Borchain's room . . . Except one—the fire . . ."

This time Fred shot to his feet, fists clenched, grimfaced. "In heaven's name!" he shouted.

There was dead silence: they were shocked to the core. They had become so exhausted that they had gradually ceased to believe in the murderer. They no longer grasped that he was there, in the house, talking to them, eating at the same table with them, perhaps playing cards with them, and raising his glass to them.

Fred strode up and down the inn parlour. Maigret seemed to have sunk into himself, his eyes almost closed; he wondered if he was going to succeed at last. For three days he had kept them on the go, hour after hour, making them repeat ten times over the same actions, the same words, partly in the hope that a forgotten detail would suddenly emerge, but above all to

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wear them down, to push the murderer to breaking-point.

"The whole thing—" His voice was quiet, the words punctuated by little puffs on his pipe—"hangs on knowing who had a safe enough hiding-place for the wallet never to be found..."

Everyone had been searched. One after the other, that first night, they had been stripped stark naked. The coal behind the cellar door had been searched through. The walls had been tapped, and the casks sounded. In spite of that, a fat wallet holding more than a hundred thousand-franc notes...

"You're making me dizzy, Fred, going round and round like that..."

"But, for heaven's sake, don't you understand—"

"Understand what?"

"That I didn't kill him! I'm not fool enough for that—me with a police record long enough to—"

"It was in the spring, then, you meant to take Thérèse to South America and buy a bistro?"

Fred glanced towards the kitchen door. "So what?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Where was the money coming from?"

Fred's eyes bored into Maigret's. "So that's what you're getting at! You're on the wrong tack, Inspector. I'll have money on the 15th of May. It was a comfortable little idea that came to me when I was doing nicely as a boxing promoter. I took out an insurance policy for a hundred thousand francs to come at the age of fifty. I shall be fifty on the 15th of May—ah, yes, Thérèse, I'm a bit longer in the tooth than I usually let on."

"Julia knew about this insurance?"

"That's nothing to do with a woman."

"So, Julia, you didn't know Fred was coming into a hundred thousand francs?"

"I knew."

"What?" Fred started.

"I also knew he wanted to go off with that trashy little—"

"And you would have let them go?"

Julia stayed quite still, her gaze fixed on Fred; there was a strange calm about her.

"You haven't answered me," Maigret persisted.

She turned her gaze on him. Her lips moved, perhaps she was going to say something important—but instead she shrugged her shoulders. "Can you ever tell what a man will do?"

Fred was not listening. He looked as if he was suddenly preoccupied with something else. Brows furrowed, he was deep in thought, and Maigret had the impression that they were thinking along the same lines.

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"Well, now, Fred?"

"What?" It was as if he had been jolted out of a dream.

"About this insurance policy—this policy that Julia saw without your knowing—I'd also like to take a look at it."

How oddly the truth can come to light! Maigret was sure he had thought of everything. Thérèse told him in her room about the departure, therefore there had to be money . . . Fred confessed to the existence of an insurance policy. And now—it was so simple, so obvious, that he almost burst out laughing—the house had been combed ten times over but no insurance policy had been found, no identity papers, no military service record.

"As you like, Inspector," Fred answered calmly with a sigh. "At least you'll be able to see how much I've saved up . . ." He went towards the kitchen.

"You can come in. When one lives at the back of beyond like this . . . Not to mention some papers I have that my pals from the old days wouldn't mind pinching . . ."

Thérèse followed them, astonished. Groux's heavy footsteps could be heard, and Canut getting up in turn.

"Don't think this is anything special," Fred went on. "I just happen to have been a coppersmith in my young days . . ."

To the right of the kitchen range there was an enormous dustbin of galvanised iron. Fred emptied the contents out right in the middle of the floor, and released the concealed double bottom in its base. He was the first to look inside. Slowly a frown spread over his face. Slowly he raised his head; his mouth hung open . . .

Lying there, among other papers, was a bulging wallet, grubby with use and held together with a band of red rubber cut from an innertube.

"*Well, Julia?*" Maigret asked softly.

Then, it seemed to him, through the woman's flabby features he saw a flash of the old Julia. She looked round at them all, and her upper lip curled disdainfully. She looked as if the tears were not far away, but they did not come. Her voice was flat when she spoke. "Well, that's that. I'm done for . . ."

The extraordinary thing was that it was Thérèse who suddenly burst into tears, like a dog howling in the presence of death. Meanwhile the woman who had done the killing asked, "I suppose you're taking me off straight away? As you have the car? Can I bring my things?"

Maigret let her pack her bits and pieces. He felt sad: reaction, after prolonged nervous tension.

How long, he wondered, had Julia known about Fred's hiding-place? On seeing the insurance policy, which he had

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never told her about, she must have realised that the day that money came he would be off with Thérèse.

Then came her chance: more money even than Fred would be getting. And she would be the one who would bring it to him, a few days or a few weeks after the affair was all over—*Look, Fred, I know everything . . . You wanted to go away with her, didn't you? You thought I was no good any more . . . Take a look in your hiding-place—It's your 'old girl' who . . .*

Maigret kept close watch over her as she moved about the bedroom where there was only a big mahogany bed and, above it, a photograph of Fred in boxing rigout. "Have to put my corset on," she said. "You won't look, will you? It's not very pretty. . ."

It was not until she was in the car that she broke down. Maigret kept his eyes fixed on the raindrops sliding down the windows. He wondered what the others were doing now, back at the inn. And who would get Groux's farm when the auctioneer's voice rang out—going, going, gone!—and the hammer fell.

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Translated by J. E. Malcolm

INSPECTOR MAIGRET solves a new problem in next month's Argosy

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ARGOSY 1962

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NICE MICE

Wee, sleekit, cowr'in' etc.

ROBERT BURNS

We shared in one delightful house;
We shared a mossy bed.
I never knew another mouse
Than her—and she is dead.

The beady eye, the nimble strength,
The soft and silken fur!
The whiskers, and the noble length
Of tail that followed her!

And now I'm lonely in the run
And lonely on the stair,
And lonely in the nest we spun—
So warm when she was there!

The wheel she loved to turn is still,
The feet that ran so light
Have twinkled up the heavenly hill
And tread the wheel of night.

E. V. RIEU, *The Lament of the White Mouse*

Mouse Proud

. . . She saw mice for the first time as they really are—not as creeping things but as dainty quadrupeds, almost, when they sat up, like tiny kangaroos, with sensitive kid-gloved forepaws and transparent ears. With quick, inaudible movements they ranged to and fro till not a crumb was left on the floor . . .

"There," he said, "a very simple adjustment. Humans want crumbs removed; mice are anxious to remove them. It ought never to have been a cause of war . . ."

C. S. LEWIS, *That Hideous Strength*

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Teenagers

"I have, my children, with the greatest difficulty, and at the utmost hazard of my life, provided for you all to the present moment; but the period is arrived when I can no longer pursue that method; snares and traps are everywhere set for me, nor shall I, without infinite danger, be able to procure sustenance to support my own existence . . . Only let me give you this one caution—Never (whatever the temptation may be) appear often in the same place; if you do, however you may flatter yourselves to the contrary, you will certainly at last be destroyed."

So saying, she stroked us all with her fore-paw, as a token of her affection, and then hurried away, to conceal from us the emotions of her sorrow, at thus sending us into the wide world.

She was no sooner gone, than the thought of being our own directors so charmed our little hearts, that we presently forgot our grief at parting from our kind parent . . .

M. P., *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse*, 1770

Cataclysmic

If all the world were candy
And the sky were frosted cake
Oh, it would be a splendid job
For a mouse to undertake . . .

But best of all the eating,
Would be the toothsome fat,
Triumphant hour of mouse-desire,
To eat a candy cat!

JOHN FARRAR, *The Ambitious Mouse*

Cold Comfort

"Are you afraid of mice?" he ventured, growing, if possible, more scarlet in the face.

"Not unless they come in quantities, like those that ate up Bishop Hatto. Why do you ask?"

"I had one crawling inside my clothes just now," said Theodore, in a voice that hardly seemed his own. "It was a most awkward situation."

"It must have been, if you wear your clothes at all tight," she observed; "but mice have strange ideas of comfort."

SAKI, *The Mouse*

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Mouse Code

" This is passing extraordinary! " said the Tailor of Gloucester, and turned over another tea-cup, which was upside down.

Out stepped a little gentleman mouse, and made a bow to the tailor!

And then from all over the dresser came a chorus of little tappings, all sounding together, and answering one another, like watch-beetles in an old worm-eaten window-shutter—

Tip tap, tip tap, tip tap tip!

BEATRIX POTTER, *The Tailor of Gloucester*

Caught Napping

Hush, Suzanne!
Don't lift your cup.
That breath you heard
Is a mouse getting up.

As the mist that steams
From your milk as you sup,
So soft is the sound
Of a mouse getting up.

There! did you hear
His feet pitter-patter,
Lighter than tipping
Of beads on a platter,

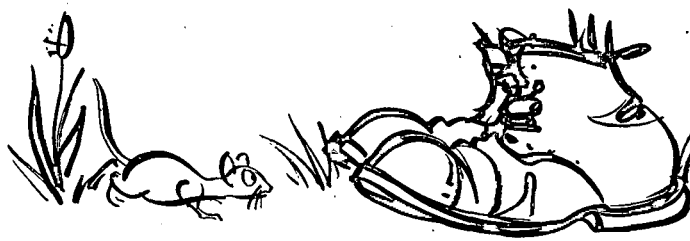
And then like a shower
On the window-pane
The little feet scampering
Back again? . . .

IAN SERRAILLIER, *The Mouse in the Wainscot*

Miceunderstanding

The man had the crude dislike for such sly, nocturnal things, but this mouse was so small and bright, its antics so pretty, that he drew his feet carefully from the fender and sat watching it almost with amusement. The mouse moved along the shadows of the fender, out upon the hearth, and sat before the glow, rubbing its head, ears and tiny belly with its paws, as if it were bathing itself with the warmth, until, sharp and sudden, the fire sank, an ember fell, and the mouse flashed into its hole.

A. E. COPPARD, *Arabesque: The Mouse*



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THE ROCKING CHAIR

Quiet as cats, we watched the three men fill the room with dust, straw, and loud arguments

BY SEAN O'FAOLAIN

EVERY autumn I am reminded of an abandoned sugawn chair that languished for years, without a seat, in the attic of my old home. It is associated in my mind with an enormous sack which the carter used to dump with a thud on the kitchen floor every October.

I was a small kid then, and it was as high as myself. This sack had come " up from the country," a sort of diplomatic messenger from the fields to the city. It smelled of dust and hay and apples, for the top half of it always bulged with potatoes, and under a layer of hay, the bottom half bulged with apples.

Its arrival always gave my mother great joy and a little sorrow, because it came from the farm where she had been born. Immediately when she saw it she glowed with pride in having a " back," as she called it—meaning something behind her more solid and permanent than city streets, though she was also saddened by the memories that choked her with this smell of hay and potatoes from the home farm and apples from the little orchard near the farmhouse.

My father, who had also been born on a farm, took great pleasure in these country fruits, and as the two of them stood over the sack in the kitchen, in the middle of the humming city, everything that their youth had meant to them used to make them smile and laugh and use words which they never used during the rest of the year, and which I thought magical; words like " late sowing," "clover crop," " inch field," " marl bottom," " headlands," " tubers," and the names of potatoes, British Queens or Arran Banners, that sounded to me like the names of regiments.

For those moments my father and mother became a young, courting couple again. As they stood over that sack, as you might say, warming their hands to it, they were intensely happy, close to each other, in love again. To me they were two very old people. Counting back now, I reckon that they were about forty-two or forty-three.

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One autumn evening after the sack arrived, my father went up to the attic and brought down the old sugawn chair. I suppose he had had it sent up to him from his home farm. It was the only thing of its kind in our house, which they had filled, in the usual peasant's idea of what constitutes elegance, with plush chairs, gold-framed pictures of Stags at Bay and exotic tropical birds, pelmets on the mantelpieces, delft shepherdesses, Chinese mandarins with nodding heads, brass bedsteads with mighty knobs and mother-of-pearl escutcheons set with bits of mirror, vast mahogany chiffoniers, and so on. But the plush-bottomed chairs, with their turned legs and their stiff backs, were for show, not for comfort, whereas in the old country sugawn chair my da could tilt and squeak and rock to his behind's content.

It had been in the place for years, rockety, bockety, chipped, and well polished, and known simply as "your father's chair" until the night when, as he was reading the evening paper with his legs up on the kitchen range, there was a sudden rending noise, and down he went through the seat of it. There he was then, bending over, with the chair stuck on to him, and my mother and myself in the splits of laughter, pulling it from him while he cursed like a trooper. This was the wreck that he now suddenly brought down from the dusty attic.

The next day, he brought in a great sack of straw from the Cornmarket, a half gallon of porter, and two old butties from the street—an ex-soldier known to the kids around as "Tear-'em-and-ate-'em" and a little dwarf of a man who guarded the stage door at the opera house when he was not being the sacristan at the chapel.

I was enchanted when I heard what they were going to do. They were going to make ropes of straw—a miracle I had never heard of—and reseat the chair. Bursting with pride in my da, I ran out and brought in my best pal, and the two of us sat as quiet as cats on the kitchen table, watching the three men filling the place with dust, straw, and loud arguments as they began to twist the ropes for the bottom of the chair.

More strange words began to float in the air with the dust: "scallops," "flat tops," "bulrushes," "cipeens," "fields in great heart . . ." And when the three men sat down for a swig of porter and looked at the old polished skeleton in the middle of the floor, they began to rub the insides of their thighs and say how there was no life at all like the country life, and my mother poured out more porter for them and laughed happily when my da began to talk about horses, and harrows, and a day after the plough, and how, for that much, he'd throw up his blooming city life and settle down on a bit of a farm for the heel of his days.

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This was a game of which he, she, and I never got tired, a fairytale that was so alluring it did not matter a damn that they had not enough money to buy a windowbox, let alone a farm of land. " Do you remember that little place," she would say, " that was going last year down at Nantenan? "

When she said that, I could feel the little reedy fields of Limerick that I knew from the holidays with my uncle, and the crumbling stone walls of old demesnes with the moss and saffron lichen on them, and the willow sighing softly by the Deel, and I could smell the wet turf rising in the damp air, and, above all, the tall wild flowers of mallow, at first cabbage-leafed, then pink and coarse, then gossamery, then breaking into cakes that I used to eat—a rank weed that's the mark of ruin in so many Irish villages, and whose profusion and colour are for me the sublime emblem of Limerick's loneliness, loveliness, and decay.

" Ah! " my da would roar. " You and your blooming ould Limerick! That bog of a place! Oh but God blast it, why didn't I grab that little farm I was looking at two years ago there below Emo? "

" Oho, ho, ho! " she would scoff. " The Queen's! The lousy Queen's! God, I'd live like a tiger and die like a Turk for Limerick. For one patch of good old Limerick. Oh, Limerick, my love, and it isn't alike! Where would ye get spuds and apples the like of them in the length and breadth of the Queen's County? "

And she grabbed a fist of hay from the bag and buried her face in it, and the tears began to stream down her face, and me and my pal screaming with laughter at her, and the sacristan lauding Tipperary, and the voices rose as Tear-'em-and-ate-'em brought up the River Barrow and the fields of Carlow, until my da jumped up with: " Come on, lads, the day is dyin' and acres wide before us! "

For all that, the straw rope was slow in emerging. Their arguments about it got louder and their voices sharper. At first all their worry had been whether the kitchen was long enough for the rope; but, so far, only a few brief worms of straw lay on the red tiles.

The sacristan said, " That bloody straw is too moist." When he was a boy in Tipp, he never seen straw the like o' that.

Tear-'em-and-ate-'em said *that* straw was old straw. When he was a lad in Carlow they never used old straw. Never! In no possible circumstances!

My da said, " What's wrong with that straw is, it's too bloomin' short! "

And they began to kick the bits with their toes, and grimace at the heap on the floor, and pick up bits and fray them apart and

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throw them aside until the whole floor was like a stable. At last they put on their coats and gave the straw a final few kicks, and my pal jumped down and said he was going back to his handball, and, in my heart, I knew that they were three impostors . . .

The kitchen was tidy that evening when I came back with the evening paper. My da was standing by the sack of potatoes. He had a spud in his fist, rubbing off the dust of its clay with his thumb. When he saw me he tossed it back in the sack, took the paper, took one of the plush-bottomed chairs, and sat on it with a little grimace. I did not say anything, but young as I was, I could see that he was not reading what he was looking at. God knows what he was seeing at that moment.

For years the anatomy of a chair stood in one of the empty attics. It was there for many years after my father died. When my mother died and I had to sell out the few bits of junk that still remained from their lives, the dealer would not bother to take the useless frame, so that when, for the last time, I walked about the echoing house, I found it standing alone in the middle of the bare attic.

As I looked at it I smelled apples, and the musk of Limerick's dust, and the turf tang from its cottages, and the mallows among the limestone ruins, and I saw my mother and father again as they were that morning, standing over the autumn sack, their arms about one another, laughing foolishly, and madly in love again.

LEISURE PLEASURE 3

A rhyming quiz—for newcomers, each clue leads to two words, each of two syllables, which rhyme in both their syllables, i.e. "Mention pension" qualifies, but not "Mention truncheon." Some of the clues are slightly contrived, but not unrecognisably so. An example of clue and answer: Larger eel—Longer conger.

1. *Devilish sailor*
2. *Worthless trunk*
3. *Oriental translation*
4. *Breakable rocket*
5. *Eternal radio*
6. *Amusing song*
7. *Joking apart*
8. *Crafty chap*
9. *Sickly fish*
10. *Furious performance*
11. *Oddly attractive*
12. *Skins relations*
13. *A cleverer man than Midas*
14. *Worried little Biblical seed*
15. *Careful Roman*
16. *Sticky moustache*
17. *Mouldy slumberwear*
18. *Righteous argument*
19. *A less somnambulistic man*
20. *Uncles*

Answers next month. **Answers to Leisure Pleasure 2 are on page 81.**

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brilliant career

by arthur porges

IT WAS almost noon when Lieutenant de Tournay reached the small secluded château of Don Esteban. The Spaniard was newly arrived from Cordoba, having been hounded out of his home by the Inquisition, which had little love for sorcerers and none for infidels.

The young officer drew rein for a moment before descending into the well-wooded, rather gloomy hollow. The château seemed brooding and sinister to his superstitious mind, and he briefly considered abandoning the visit. Then he thought of what people said about Don Esteban's powers, and what they might mean to an ambitious man. His thin lips drew taut; he dug the cruel spurs into the horse's wet flanks, and galloped towards the building.

At the door he dismounted and reached for the heavy knocker. It was in the shape of a taloned hand, and he hated to touch the greenish metal. When finally he seized the rough casting and slammed it briskly against the wood, it seemed to him that the fingers were warm and twisted in his grasp.

Abruptly the door swung open in perfect silence, and he found himself confronted by a tiny Moorish maid.

" I have come to see Don Esteban," he told her imperiously.

" My master is expecting you, Lieutenant," she replied in bad French. " Please enter."

Bewildered, he followed her down a long dark corridor, heavily carpeted. How could the Spaniard know of his visit? He hadn't decided to come until late last night, and had told nobody. Very likely the man made the same absurd claim to every caller. Yet de Tournay hoped fervently that Don Esteban had all the strange powers imputed to him; only then could the officer expect the kind of help he so urgently desired.

They reached a door at the end of the hall; the maid opened it, and ushered him in. He saw that it was no ordinary chamber. Twice the size of the average room, it was crowded with a vast

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assortment of unusual items. There were telescopes, chemical retorts, stuffed animals, and dozens of shelves filled with books.

De Tournay turned his attention to the man seated at a huge desk. The sorcerer was short and stocky, so dark as to suggest the Moor, and redeemed from extreme ugliness only by his eyes, which were wide set and apparently of boundless depth. His thick yet facile fingers were busy adjusting a brass astrolabe.

Smiling, he put the instrument aside.

"Please sit down."

The officer dropped into an armchair, staring as if entranced at an enormous glass bowl in which a purple liquid seethed and purred hypnotically. There was no fire under it, and the Frenchman crossed himself automatically.

The tiny crowsfeet at the corners of Don Esteban's eyes deepened at this, but he said only, "Why have you come to see me, monsieur?"

Drawing his eyes away from the boiling solution, de Tournay looked squarely at the Spaniard and said, "I need your help, senor."

"Indeed?" The heavy brows rose. "In what way?"

"Advancement," was the prompt reply. "I am ambitious. To command a tiny garrison in this godforsaken provincial town is not my idea of a worthy career. I have imagination and courage—and a profound knowledge of political realities. If I could but find an opening—the tiniest crack, metaphorically speaking—at Court, I could rise to almost any height."

"I see." The brown eyes twinkled with amusement. "But why—assuming, of course, that I have any control over your future—should I help you?"

"A powerful friend at Court can be useful to any man in these troubled times. Remember, there is an Inquisition in France, too, senor."

"Very true. You are a clever young man. I begin to see why you favour a political career. And history repeats itself. There is a man in Spain who was aided by me. Thanks to him, I escaped with my life and fortune. But before that, I helped another young man, a novice politician like yourself. He proved to be an ingrate, and almost ruined me. How can I be sure of you, Lieutenant?"

"You have my solemn word as a gentleman. My family, senor, is as good as any in France. It is just that we are out of favour at present. Help me to a place at Court, and any protection in my power will be yours, no matter what political winds are blowing."

"There is merit in what you say. The moment is indeed

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ripe; I need a friend in high places. As a foreigner and—ah—student of the occult, I am not in a position to act for myself. You, however—but I forget my duty as host." He picked up a tiny brass hammer and rapped a silver gong. The vibrant notes had hardly died away before the Moorish maid entered.

"Desire the cook," Don Esteban told her, "to put another capon on the spit. Lieutenant de Tournay will stay to dine." She curtsied and left. Suddenly the officer felt ravenously hungry. It had been some hours since breakfast.

The Spaniard now turned his luminous eyes to the young Frenchman. "Tell me just what kind of opening at Court you have in mind."

The other leaned forward, his sharp, pale face animated. "If I could get a commission in the King's Musketeers! From there, a clever man can rise fast."

"You are ambitious," the sorcerer said dryly. "That is the most exclusive regiment in France. Every vacancy is fought over by a dozen young bloods. Nevertheless, we shall see."

He opened a drawer in the desk, took out a large crystal block, and placed it between them. He rubbed the top with one palm, making motions that were like caresses. Then he bent down for a long, searching scrutiny of the surface.

After several seconds he looked up, meeting the officer's gaze squarely. "We are in luck. At this very moment a niece of

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Monsieur Tavannes, Captain of the Musketeers, is riding towards Vrillac. She will be attacked, about sunset, by several ruffians—hired by St Just. Now, if you should arrive at a critical time with, say, a dozen good men of your command . . . you see the possibilities. Save the niece, and Tavannes will be in your debt. He loves the girl."

"Bien!" de Tournay cried. "And all France knows Tavannes. He has no qualms, no subtlety. What he wants, he takes; and the King stands behind him. No matter who seeks a post with the Musketeers, it is for him to say yes or no." He slapped his thighs gleefully. "You are indeed a miracle worker, senor. I had feared you were a charlatan, but now all doubts are gone."

"There are many kinds of miracle," the sorcerer replied gravely. "Gratitude among men is one of the rarest. You will not forget what I have done?" he demanded, peering deeply into the officer's eyes.

"Never! I swear it."

"Good. But I shall make sure." He rapped the silver bell again, and the thin, sweet notes bored into de Tournay's head, making it resound like a tuning fork. Giddy, the young man clapped his hands to his ears. It made no difference; the vibrations swelled to a crescendo, tearing at the roots of his brain. Then Don Esteban's calm voice restored him to normality.

"Now it is time to leave," the Spaniard said. "I suggest that you lie in wait, with your men, about a kilometre from Vrillac, on the North Road. Mademoiselle Cortot should arrive shortly before sunset."

"Excellent!" the officer said with enthusiasm, as he rose. "I go. And my deepest thanks, senor. I shall not forget what I owe you."

He was humming a gay little air as the maid led him to the door.

If de Tournay still felt any lingering doubts about Don Esteban's powers, they were dispelled at sunset.

Waiting in a clump of trees just off the North Road, he saw the girl, riding a white palfrey, and accompanied by two men-at-arms, coming down the dusty path. Why she should be passing through this quiet province was a question of no concern to the officer. She was Tavannes' niece. arriving on schedule, and nothing else mattered.

When she was almost opposite his position, six riders, wearing the livery of St Just, charged down upon her. De Tournay guessed that they planned to hold her as a hostage, thereby guaranteeing the behaviour of Tavannes, who had often frustrated the plans of St Just, himself a powerful nobleman.

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The young lieutenant, callously enough, waited until the two attendants had been slaughtered, despite their brave resistance. He wanted the girl to know real fear before being rescued. Then, at just the right moment, he galloped out with his dozen tough troopers, a gallant figure on his black warhorse, and scattered the attackers. He did not kill any, for at the back of his mind was the thought that St Just, too, was a power in the realm, and needn't be antagonised more than was strictly necessary in the situation.

The upshot was just what Don Esteban had predicted. The grateful Mademoiselle Cortot was delighted to help her rescuer by praising him to Tavannes. In a few weeks de Tournay, relieved of his dull post in Vrillac, was on his way to Paris, a newly-commissioned junior lieutenant in the King's Musketeers.

Once established in that teeming city, he wrote enthusiastically to Don Esteban, letters full of professions of gratitude and esteem. " It must make one feel truly godlike, to wield such power over other men. I am deeply in your debt, my dear Don Esteban—my dear friend, let me say."

But after some months, the letters became more querulous in tone. Advancement was no simple matter, even for a musketeer. There were intrigues on all sides. It was King against Cardinal; musketeer against the army; Monsieur, the King's brother, was an unknown quantity altogether. De Tournay urged the sorcerer to intercede just once more. After that, no more help would be needed. But now, almost a year in Paris, and still a junior lieutenant; it was intolerable.

Reluctantly, the Spaniard agreed to act, and to de Tournay's gratification in a few weeks he was promoted to the post of Senior Lieutenant of the company. Before him now, blocking his way to the real heights, there stood only Tavannes himself.

De Tournay decided to use the Cardinal, who loathed the Captain of the Musketeers, as a means to the end he sought. But nothing seemed to work out when Don Esteban stood aloof again. The young Frenchman's efforts to favour the Cardinal made his musketeers rebellious; and the Cardinal thereupon felt nothing but contempt for the officer who promised much but couldn't control his men.

In despair the lieutenant sent a series of special messengers to the sorcerer, asking for immediate help. There was a faint note of menace in these latest communications. A man as perceptive as Don Esteban could easily read between the lines. De Tournay had power now. Perhaps he wasn't destined to command the Musketeers, but he had more than enough influence to direct the Inquisition towards Vrillac and a certain infidel magician. Of course, if Don Esteban saw fit to help him again . . .

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To the lieutenant's satisfaction, the indirect threats worked perfectly. The Spaniard sent a prompt reply, promising that de Tournay would soon have his wish. It was only a matter of days now.

The Frenchman couldn't help feeling sceptical, however. He was in considerable trouble at the moment; even Tavannes was losing faith in his senior lieutenant. In fact, if it weren't for the pleas of Mademoiselle Cortot, the gruff, honest captain would send that slippery young schemer packing . . .

But, as always, Don Esteban got results. Some assassin, perhaps one of the Cardinal's supporters, put an ounce of lead through Tavannes' body, so that after two days of agony, the Captain died.

It was very fortunate for de Tournay that he just happened to be near enough to hear Tavannes' cries and neatly dispatch the killer. By so doing, he saved some highly secret papers destined for Monsieur, the King's brother. It was an impressive performance, and one that made his appointment as Captain of the Musketeers inevitable.

Shortly after achieving this, the fulfilment of his highest hopes, de Tournay wrote again to Don Esteban. The note was brief to the point of curtness. The erstwhile lieutenant had risen to the summit, and now held a most precarious perch, surrounded by able, vindictive enemies. He was hated by the Cardinal and distrusted by his own men. He needed the sorcerer at his side so that no time would ever be wasted sending letters back and forth by courier. Don Esteban must come immediately to Paris.

The Spaniard replied that he was no longer young and preferred to stay where he was, in the pleasant greenery of the province. The next letter from Paris was brutally candid. Don Esteban hadn't been asked; it was an order. Join de Tournay, or else . . . There followed veiled references to the Inquisition. Sadly the sorcerer complied.

On his arrival he was installed, more or less secretly, in tiny, dirty quarters in an outlying wing of the palace. At first, de Tournay was outwardly courteous, claiming concealment was vital. But he soon concluded that Don Esteban was losing his powers, since the man seemed to have aged and appeared both uneasy and frightened in the officer's presence. To de Tournay's suspicious mind, it seemed obvious that the sorcerer had hoped to profit from a few coincidences, and gain credit for his client's success. Such a charlatan was hardly likely to be of further use. Still, on the off-chance that this reasoning was faulty, the officer refused to let him leave Paris.

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Meanwhile, de Tournay's prospects continued to improve. The King looked to him for everything, since, unlike the bluff, honest Tavannes, this captain offered no moral judgments on royal behaviour. Whatever the King wanted, the musketeer was willing to help him to obtain, regardless of the ethical problems involved. And no matter what the officer spent—and he lived very lavishly—the gold piled up. In addition to constant bribes, there was extortion; and whenever a "traitor" had his estates confiscated, the Crown got some of the profits, but de Tournay a great deal more.

For Don Esteban, however, shivering in his unheated rooms, there was no prospect at all. His savings were gone, and food itself a problem. Those servants who knew of his existence naturally adopted the contemptuous attitude now habitual with their master. Why waste food on an old man with no friends? The stuff could be sold for good money In despair, Don Esteban decided to appeal directly to his one-time client.

And so, at about noon of a bright spring day, de Tournay looked up from his ornate desk to see the emaciated, whitehaired figure of the Spanish sorcerer standing before him.

"Mordieu!" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing here? You must not be seen with me."

"But, Captain," Don Esteban pleaded. "I am actually starving here. The servants are openly insolent and won't even give me food. I am growing old, and will soon die in this place. Give me leave to return to Vrillac."

"Impossible," was the brusque reply. "I may still need your help." Then he studied the shabby form and frowned. "Or will I? It's not likely. You are finished, old man; anybody can see that. Whatever power you had, there is nothing left any more. I believe now it was all coincidence. Go, then—back to your rat's nest in Vrillac. I care not what you do."

The sorcerer shifted uneasily where he stood.

"Captain," he said in a diffident voice, "I have done as I promised two years ago in my château.' Are you not Captain of the King's Musketeers? You swore to be my friend."

De Tournay gave a braying laugh. "So you think to take the credit for my advancement, hein? You are a fool. What I have achieved is due to my own merits entirely. Be gone, old man! You begin to anger me."

The Spaniard shivered in his ragged clothes.

"I am penniless, monsieur. Give me a few coins for my expenses, and I'll go away."

"Not an écu. Stop bothering me, and clear out quickly." He fixed his pale eyes on the Spaniard. "I am a good son of

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Mother Church, and have already overpaid any debt to you by my tolerance of your heresy. If you linger, I shall be forced to invoke the Holy Office."

The old sorcerer stiffened, erect in his faded robes.

"Very well," he said with dignity. "I see I must go without funds. But of your charity, monsieur, at least some food for my journey. I have eaten nothing for many hours."

De Tournay sprang to his feet, his sharp, pallid face contorted with anger.

"This is intolerable! That I, Captain of the King's Musketeers, should be defied in my own quarters by a filthy infidel sorcerer—not even a Frenchman. Guard!" he roared. "Ho, the guard! To me, at once! Old man," he added, coldly sinister, "you have stayed too long. It's rack and stake for you now."

"I think not," Don Esteban said, his voice deep with authority. He reached out a thick finger and rapped its nail against the silver gong that stood on de Tournay's desk.

The vibrant note surged through the room, penetrating the officer's skull, and making it resound like a tuning fork. It hurt damnably, and de Tournay clapped his hands to his ears, crying out. The room swirled about him, dislimned, and re-formed.

He was back in Don Esteban's château. Why, there was that purple liquid purring its subtle song. But that was two years in the past; it was all very confusing.

"Since your gratitude doesn't even extend to the offer of a frugal meal," Don Esteban was saying, "I shall dine at my own château."

As he spoke, the last notes of the silver bell died away, and the Moorish maid stood just inside the door, awaiting her master's orders.

"You see, my dear Lieutenant," the Spaniard told the dazed officer, "that surprisingly quick rise to power took place only in your mind, and lasted a mere two hours. I have learnt to test for gratitude in advance; it is much safer. The career was my invention; a fantasy that seemed quite real to you. But the character you displayed when achieving success was your own. It is a type I became familiar with many years ago, in a slow, painful manner. Luckily, thanks to my art, I no longer have to gamble on the effects of power." He turned to the little maid.

"You will tell the cook that the second capon may now come off the spit. Lieutenant de Tournay," he added, infinite scorn in his voice, "will not stay to dine after all."

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Albacore!

BY TOM FILER

IN THE normal course of events men are able to live behind the masks with which they face the world and their sons. Even six men and a boy on a small ship can somehow manage to hide from each other until the pattern of their lives together is suddenly shattered.

My father was a man of the sea. I knew him only as a stranger who occasionally visited our house in Santa Monica, a gaunt, long-legged stranger, ever smiling, who, though he talked incessantly, revealed little of himself to me. My mother had died when I was very young and I had been raised by an aunt, a bitter

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spinster whose hatred of my father, while unspoken, was no secret to me.

For many years my father had been promising to take me albacore fishing with him in the season following my fourteenth birthday. I believe the thought of this voyage meant as much to him as it did to me; we both sensed that we would never know each other in the presence of my aunt. She was the past, a shadow between us that we feared to cross. Cross it we must, but I was too young to know that then.

That he would be fighting for his life in the summer of my fourteenth year was a thing my father could not have foreseen. The season before had been a disastrous one and he was on the verge of losing not only his second ship, the *Jisto*, but his beloved *Chela* as well. He told me nothing of this. He was true to his word, though by bringing me into his life at that particular point he was, perhaps, not being true to himself.

My presence on the voyage was deeply resented by Abraham, an old negro from the British Honduras, who had worked with my father for fifteen years, and who had come to own a share of the *Chela*. His resentment was born in fear, and his efforts to drive me away were an attempt to protect me from the past, but I was not to discover this until much later.

A Mexican crew came aboard at Ensenada, and their needs and fears and loyalties were to add to the tensions on the little ship. There was Rafael, the head fisherman, a gentle and proud man who became my first friend at sea; Jesus Luna—or Jesus Moon, as I came to call him, for this is his name translated—the second fisherman, a hulk of a man, a walking appetite; Guillermo, small and angry, who was both cook and fisherman; and Ramon, like a dark faun, with a mind that never quite caught up with his years, and who was almost as ignorant of the sea and its ways as I was, though my father had not been informed of this by Jesus Moon, who had brought the youth aboard when another man failed to appear.

It wasn't until our third day at sea that I faced some of the realities of my father's world. We had made bait earlier at San Quintin Bay, one hundred and eighty miles south of San Diego. The jig poles were lowered and six trolling lines streamed behind the *Chela*. Our course was 150 degrees; our destination was the Benitos Islands.

For three days life had been serene and uneventful. The sea and my father Sam Stark, and the men of the *Chela* might have been well rehearsed actors for all I knew of what they truly thought and felt.

Then the albacore struck . . .

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My father's hand gripped my shoulders as one of the jig lines grew taut. His fingers tightened painfully but my cry of protest was lost beneath a triumphant bellow.

"Albacore!" my father shouted, as the sea exploded and a fish rocketed into the air.

He ran to the conn mast and began to ring the bell there, striking it with such fierceness that I thought his great hand would shatter the metal. The sun struck silver as again the fish burst from the sea and tried to shake the hook. My father took the wheel, pushing Guillermo aside and crying, "Pescados, muchacho! Andale!"

Already the rest of the crew were taking bamboo poles from the rack beside the bait tank and putting on leather socket belts. These belts were used to protect a man's stomach from injury when he was pulling in a big fish, the base of his pole being placed in the socket.

Simultaneously my father was turning the wheel so that the *Chela* began to describe a large circle. Abraham had scrambled up on the bait tank and was scooping anchovies into a hand net, then tossing them into the water, "chumming" the albacore, in an attempt to bring the whole school to the surface. In the meantime Rafael started pulling in the fish that had struck the jig line.

"Get those lines!" howled my father. Two more fish had been hooked on the jig lures. I started down towards the well-deck but an angry voice stopped me. "Stay up here, Ben! Stay out of the way!"

I had thought that I was going to be allowed to take part in the fishing, but I was too excited to be disappointed then. I climbed back to the hood over the bait tank from where I could look directly down on the fantail. And now there began a scene that I'll never forget, for though I saw fish caught after this, I never again saw an ocean so unbelievably choked with life, and of course I never again saw all this with the new eyes that were mine on that amazing day.

"Put those cages in the water!" my father shouted. "Fish, you monkeys, fish!"

Ramon, the only one not pulling in a jig line, picked up one of the cages and put it over the side. He was either nervous or had mistaken my father's words, for instead of attaching the metal hooks to the railing he did just what my father had ordered, namely put the cage in the water. It sank immediately. I heard a groan, a bellow of rage, and then a steaming string of curses, and looked behind me to see my father tying down the wheel.

I learnt later that any object falling in the water is liable to make a school of fish sound and disappear completely, but even

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knowing this I could never forgive my father for what he did to Ramon. He acted as though the boy were no longer a human being, and in doing so I saw him lose his own humanity.

The wheel secure, he literally flew down to the well-deck. Still spewing curses, ignoring the ladder, he leapt from the conn, his long arms waving like some maddened crane. Just as Ramon was picking up a second cage my father grabbed him by the back of the collar and threw him to the deck. He began hanging the cages over the fantail himself while the youth lay there gasping, the wind knocked out of his lungs.

A moment later, Rafael, the head fisherman, landed his albacore. He went to Ramon and helped him to his feet, speaking quickly to him in Spanish. Then he approached my father, who was about to lift another cage into position. "We will do this, Captain," he said, taking the metal frame, almost pulling it from my father's hands. "Return to the wheel."

"You telling me what to do?" my father growled, and I thought he was going to strike Rafael too. The Mexican only pointed silently into the sea. Here was a thing they both understood. It seemed to be the ocean no longer, but a surging plain of silver. Each time one of the anchovies struck the surface there was an angry boil and the tiny fish disappeared. My father whirled and ran to the conn, cutting the speed.

"Mira, Ramon. Watch me," said Rafael to the frightened youth. He put another cage over the side. By now Jesus Moon was climbing into the first cage with a long bamboo pole.

"Y ahora, tu. Now you," continued Rafael, his voice calm despite the turbulent sea and the increasingly frantic activity around him. Already Guillermo was in the second cage, drawing a white feather lure, called a squid, through the water.

Ramon obeyed and hung a cage over the side. "Muy bueno, muchacho," said Rafael. "Y pues, los otros." Ramon proceeded to deal with the rest of the cages with no further mishaps.

Rafael flashed a look of triumph at my father, but I could see that it was lost on the captain of the *Chela*. Next he grabbed a pole and jumped into one of the cages as the others had. He began to draw his squid through the water on the short line attached to his pole.

"Ayee!" cried Jesus Moon. His pole moved back over his shoulder and a large albacore came arcing out of the sea as though it had taken wing, as though it hadn't taken all the muscle and weight of a man's body to snatch it living from its natural element. The fish struck the deck with a resounding thud. The unbarbed hook was removed easily from its mouth and in ten seconds the man was fishing again.

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The instant Rafael's lure hit the water a fish struck it. Else he might have prevented what happened next. As it was, he could only watch helplessly. He gasped some warning but it was lost in the general mêlée, and then the albacore took all his attention.

Ramon had climbed into one of the cages with a pole. He began moving the feather lure through the water as the others did, but even I could see that he was merely imitating them, had never done it before. Then a fish struck his squid and pulled the pole right out of his hands. Ramon stood there, stunned, watching it sink down into the depths. He looked up at me, scratched his head. Then he began to grin foolishly.

"Benny!" my father howled. "Take the wheel!"

Ramon's lips curled back over his teeth; his grin became the snarl of a wild thing cornered. The image of his dark, startled eyes was still bright in my mind as I ran to my father, saw him straining towards me like some chained animal.

"Take the wheel, boy," he said hoarsely. "Keep her going in a nice big circle."

"He doesn't understand . . ." I began. But my father was gone. I heard a cry of dismay.

"You phoney sonovabitch! You never fished in your life!"

"No, Capitan!"

I couldn't have heard the sound of a fist striking flesh from the conn but so implicit was this in the silence which followed that I winced. I didn't dare look away from the wheel just then; when I did Ramon was nowhere in sight.

My father was in the cage where he had been. As I watched, his lean frame arched back and heaved what must have been a thirty pound albacore over the side.

"Come on, you monkeys!" he exulted. "Let an old man show you how to fish!"

Two hours later I still gripped the wheel and gazed with astonishment on the scene below. Still the sea spewed forth its harvest; the deck was choked with fish, so much so that some of them were in danger of sliding over the railing of the fantail.

My father was quiet now. His face was white. The others too were silent and their movements were slower; but slow though they were, Abraham kept tossing the anchovies over the side and the albacore kept rising.

Once Abraham paused in his task and my father turned on him so swiftly that the Negro nearly fell from his perch. "Chum, you halfwit!" my father panted. "Chum!"

I saw Abraham crouch as though he might spring at my father, but instead he began tossing anchovies over the side again.

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Soon it became apparent that something would have to be done about the albacore piling up in the well-deck, or the fishing would have to stop.

"Ben!" cried my father, turning to look at me. There was an instant while he gathered his strength once more. "Tie down the wheel. Get Ramon!"

After securing the wheel I climbed down from the conn and entered the cabin. Seeing an extra pair of hip boots on the deck I quickly drew them on.

I found Ramon lying on his bunk. He had brought his own pillow aboard. It had been elaborately embroidered by his mother. On its face was a scene depicting two bluebirds poised in flight, about to enter into a passionate aerial embrace. Ramon lay there, his arms encircling this pillow, hugging it tightly to him.

"Hey, Ramon," I said. "My father wants you."

He looked up. His cheeks were wet with tears and there was a bruise beside his left eye. "Tell chingada go to hell!" he sobbed, and put his face in the pillow again. At that moment I'm certain I hated my father quite as intensely as he did.

"Come on, Ramon," I urged. "He won't hit you again. I—I promise." But Ramon wouldn't answer me.

Finally I went on deck. Instead of seeking out my father, however, I went to Rafael and told him what was wrong. Rafael hesitated. I know he was surprised that I had come to him. He glanced over at my father but he was struggling with a fish. There was a look on the Mexican's face that made me uneasy, though I didn't understand it at the time.

"Here," he said suddenly, thrusting his pole into my hands. I ducked as Guillermo heaved a fish over his shoulder and it soared past my head. His line whipped out again. The hook hissed by my ear. "You want to fish?" Rafael said. It was a statement rather than a question. Before I could reply, he was gone.

I couldn't seem to catch my breath; I felt weak, as though I had run a great distance. My legs trembled and my hands shook with excitement or fear, probably both. I had watched the others. I thought I knew what to do. I moved my pole back and forth, made the squid lure race through the water near the surface. At the end of each draw, I splashed the tip of the pole into the sea. Rafael told me later this was to excite the albacore, supposedly making them think that other fish were rising. There was no need for exciting the fish now, however, for beneath me in the clear water I saw the silver hordes completely engulfing the *Chela*.

"Benny!" screamed my father. "Get out of there!" But

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another albacore hit his squid and he could do little but dart fierce glances at me as he struggled with the fish.

That they were not looks of anger, but of horror, I did not realise until I heard Guillermo's cry.

"Tiburon! Shark!" wailed Guillermo, as he pulled in an albacore that had been chewed right in half. Something struck my lure with such awful force that at first I thought my arms would be pulled from their sockets, and the next instant expected to be dragged head first into the sea.

I leaned back, the pole digging painfully into my belly. Then I felt hands go round my waist. I looked down to find I was wearing a safety belt. Somehow I managed to get the butt of the pole into the socket.

"Bring him near the surface. He will leap," Rafael's soft voice said. "Then bring him out with all your body."

But I had watched the others long enough to know the truth. Unless you brought your fish up in that first instant, before the fear and pain and anger were resolved into one great surge of fighting power, the chances of losing him were good. It was too late for me now. Already my arms were growing weak.

"Get him out of there!" howled my father, and I saw him as if in a dream straining back with the fish on his line. I had a strange moment of clarity then, in which I realised my father—as frantically concerned as he was—would be incapable of helping me until he landed that albacore. I suddenly felt more alone than I ever had when my father was a stranger.

"Keep his head up!" Rafael cried.

"I can't, I can't," I groaned, still trying. I looked into the clear sea but it was no longer the sea. The *Chela* seemed to be floating in a seething cauldron of albacore.

Somewhere in their midst was the other, long and grey and evil; I remembered the fish on Guillermo's line, neatly chopped in half. It was too late but my fingers gripped the pole as though they had a life of their own. The sun blazed with dizzying heat from a thousand shimmering flanks. And still I held the pole as though life, not death, were on the end of my line, ready to pluck me from the decks of the *Chela*.

I almost fell over backwards. Too dazed for a moment to know what had happened, I stepped out of the cage at Rafael's bidding. "Go and hand the fish down to Ramon," he said.

Then I saw the open jackknife in his hand and realised he had cut my line. "Go on," Rafael said. "It is all right. You did well." He had another rig, and by the time I had reached the hold he was fishing again.

Though I knew he had seen all of this, my father remained silent.

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He was too engrossed in merely holding his own to make any comment. Sweat streamed down his face. His lower lip was bleeding where he had bitten it.

As I watched, another albacore swung in over his shoulder. But it was not like this. It was like a convulsion. Every fibre of his being was visibly resisting the will which raised the pole with sufficient force to wrest that fish from the sea. He grew livid. Each breath was a sob. The ropy muscles in his long arms twitched and coiled like a nest of tortured snakes. The albacore struck the deck; he freed his hook. The line sang out again. I understood then that my father would never give up until the ocean did.

I began lowering the fish to Ramon, who stacked them in the freezing hold. Many of the albacore were not dead. Their death agony was over—the sullen, muscular convulsions in which they beat themselves against the deck as though in a last futile protest against their fate—but still they quivered as I picked them up.

I really saw them now for the first time. They were magnificent creatures, some weighing more than forty pounds, with pectoral fins that swept back almost to their tails. These fins must have been shining wings in the sea. Out of the water they were like withered sticks. Gleaming, silver scaled, sleek, and powerful, these dying fish were streamlined beyond man's most outrageous dreams.

To hold them in my hands, these creatures who had been so proud and strong only minutes before, to see their great eyes bulging, still alive, all bloody from the hooks, became a heart-breaking task. They were so clean and fine they made me feel somehow dirty.

You are thinking I was very young. Yet what I wouldn't give for one moment relived of what I felt that day. Death no longer startles me. Pain is life. I accept these things and something has been for ever lost—innocence perhaps, with its precious vision. My eyes were clear then. I saw beauty where I found it.

"Hey, sonny, come up here," a voice rasped. "I show you how to chum."

"I've got to work here," I said.

"Come here, boy."

Fearful, though I wasn't sure why, I obeyed. As I climbed up on the bait tank Abraham's green eyes never left mine. He grinned.

"Let a black man show you something," he said, scooping up some more anchovies with his net. "Now see this. See this and remember, boy. This is how we catch the mighty albacore,

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your daddy and me." His hand darted into the net and emerged with one of the tiny fish. Its head and part of its body protruded between his thick, calloused fingers, wriggling frantically.

"Watch! Watch, you son of Stark. I do not throw this fish just so into the sea. No. Because he does not excite the albacore this way. We must make him exciting. Watch, boy."

And before I knew what he was doing his thumb gouged into the anchovy's eye and flicked it out so that it flew right into my face. I gave a cry of disgust and horror, then wiped the dripping thing from my cheek. And all this while Abraham's eyes held mine, bright with some fierce elation; pale green they were, like shallow, reef-webbed seas, startling in his dark seamed face.

"Watch!" he cried. "See how he swim now that I fix him." And he threw the anchovy into the ocean where the tortured creature swam about in circles until an albacore snapped him up.

Abraham chuckled. "He no swim away when I fix him. Good, eh? Now you try." His black hand thrust one of the bait fish at me, but I was already backing away.

"I've got to load the fish," I said, my eyes averted.

Abraham began to laugh. "You no like? Not pretty, eh boy? You better learn. Your daddy like his boy to learn!"

"Get out those chum!"

It was my father's voice, or what was left of it, little more than a hoarse gasp. It was enough, however, to make Abraham return to his business and leave me alone, though from time to time I heard his raucous growl, "Look, boy! Look!"

At dusk the fish sounded. The sea was still and the crimson light from the departed sun bathed the *Chela* so that it seemed as though not only the albacore, but the whole world, was immersed in blood. My hands were wet with slime and scales and blood. The deck was slippery with blood.

I heard a soft laugh and there was a tiny splat on the deck beside me. I looked up at Abraham just as the whole anchovy wriggled from his fingers and followed its eye. The little creature arched and flopped about, futilely trying to escape both the pain of its socketless eye and asphyxiation in this alien element, air. Whether he had intended this to happen or not I'll never know, but my growing hatred for the man was no longer contained. "You bastard!" I cried.

Abraham roared with laughter. "Who, me, sonny?"

What happened then was like a bad dream. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I found myself on my hands and knees trying to catch that small fish. I was beyond thinking at that point, but somehow it seemed that my only answer to Abraham would

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be in giving this insignificant bit of silver life its freedom in the sea.

"Look at the boy!" jeered Abraham. "Catch the fishy, boy!"

The others paid little heed. They stood or sat where they had been when the albacore sounded, silent statues in the crimson air, too exhausted as yet from their monumental effort to move.

The fish wriggled near the fish hold. I grabbed it but it slipped through my fingers.

"Get him, boy!" howled Abraham.

Ramon's face appeared above the hatch. "What you do?" he grinned, apparently recovered from his earlier mood. "Que pasa, Benny?"

"The boy is a great fisherman! Mira!" laughed Abraham.

At last my fingers closed firmly over the anchovy and I rose and dropped it into the sea. Ramon stood beside me, puzzled, as I watched the fish swim in the frantic circles Abraham had doomed it to.

"Pobrecito . . . Poor little fish," murmured Ramon.

I looked at him in some surprise, not expecting to hear such gentle words from this dull-witted youth.

"Fools!" cried Abraham, his voice quivering with rage. "You are both fools!"

Just then a gull swooped down and snatched up the tiny fish.

"See, boy!" rasped Abraham. I glanced up at him apprehensively. He was scowling furiously, but suddenly he seemed more concerned than angry. "Save your pity," he growled. "There are too many fishes in the sea."

My father appeared, Rafael and the others behind him. I was shocked at his appearance. He swayed as he approached me. His eyes were almost lost in the dark hollows of their sockets. Even his great beak of a nose had faded to the pallor of the rest of his face.

"You know, kid," he said in a ghost of a voice. "You fall in that ocean, it's not the sharks that'll get you. It's those boots." He pointed at my newly-acquired hip boots. "They fill up, you sink like a rock."

Now he turned to the others. "All right," he said. I could barely hear him. "Load up the rest of the fish." He started for the cabin, paused again. "Your watch, Jesus. Course is 170." Then he climbed to the main deck, pulling himself up slowly. Once more he faced us. Rafael stood before him in the well-deck.

"You did a good job," my father said. He sighed, out of breath, continued wearily, "Give 'em all a couple of beers, Rafael."

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He started to topple then, and would have fallen if Rafael hadn't caught him by the waist and steadied him. My father started into the cabin. Rafael quickly climbed to the main deck and tried to help him. But weaving as he was, my father pushed the Mexican roughly away.

For a moment they confronted each other silently. In the shadows of the cabin my father's gaunt figure towered ominously over the little fisherman. Then he spoke haltingly, his voice thick and dangerous and drunken. He spoke only for Rafael, but I heard two words.

"My son . . ."

"And Ramon . . ." Rafael began.

My father slowly turned and disappeared into the cabin.

"You clean up now," Rafael said to me. "You do enough."

I guess I must have looked about as bad as my father because they were all eyeing me nervously, all but Abraham, who was grinning. "Yes, you rest now, little boy," he said.

"I'll help," I replied, meeting his eyes. But I wasn't very convincing, for in truth I had begun to feel quite strange.

On the conn deck Jesus Moon threw the engine into high speed and the *Chela* moved southward in the dusk.

"Go on, Benny," Rafael said gently.

"O.K.," I murmured. "Thanks."

Salt water ran constantly in the galley sink so that fresh water could be saved for drinking. I washed my hands and watched as this sea water ran red, then pink, and finally clear. At last my hands were clean.

I looked in the mirror over the sink. There was something clinging to my cheek. I removed it, washed it down the drain. I washed my hands again. Suddenly I rushed out on deck. It was dark now and they couldn't see me. It was all right. I leaned over the side as far as I could. It was as though all the tides of the sea were rising within me.

For some time I lay there, exhausted, my stomach aching and my head pounding furiously. Yet I felt better now, clean. Cleaning my hands had not been enough.

The night was warm so I took a blanket and climbed to the conn deck, where I curled up in a fold of the bait net. Just as I was dropping off to sleep I realised there was someone kneeling beside me. "You awake, Ben?" my father murmured.

Remembering Ramon, anger swelled within me. I shut my eyes tightly and lay rigid and still. And then, instead of Ramon's tearstained and bruised face, I saw my father's ravaged features as he stood before me, swaying with exhaustion, and I heard his voice as he said, "My son . . ."

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" Yes, I'm awake," I said.

"Are you all right? "

" Yes."

His hand touched my shoulder, not in the usual punch or muscle-bruising squeeze, but gently, so that it was almost like a caress at the time. Perhaps I was imagining it, but it seemed to me that never before had my father touched me in such a way. Then he was gone.

I heard voices on the deck below. One of them was angry.

" We have a load. Then why do we go south? " It was Guillermo.

" He is the captain," said Rafael.

Again there was only the sound of the engine and the hiss of the sea.

" Mal hombre, this captain," said Guillermo. " A bad man."

" Chingada," Ramon giggled.

" He is the captain," said Rafael. " Shut up and load the fish."

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THE TWO WITCHES

O, sixteen hundred and ninety one,
Never was year so well begun,
Backsy-forsy and inside-out,
The best of all years to ballad about.

On the first fine day of January
I ran to my sweetheart Margery
And tossed her over the roof so far
That down she fell like a shooting star.

But when we two had frolicked and kissed
She clapped her fingers about my wrist
And tossed me over the chimney stack,
And danced on me till my bones did crack.

Then, when she had laboured to ease my pain,
We sat by the stile of Robin's Lane,
She in a hare and I in a toad
And puffed at the clouds till merry they glowed.

We spelled our loves until close of day.
I wished her good-night and walked away,
But she put out a tongue that was long and red
And swallowed me down like a crumb of bread.

ROBERT GRAVES

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CHARITY

Cupid was dragging his heels,
but just one little push . . .

BY JOHN PUDNEY

YOU do yourself less than justice, Miss Honeyfent. You are not black, not even grey," the Recording Angel would murmur, stifling a yawn.

Sometimes he would raise his voice in politely angelic exasperation. "This isn't sin, you silly thing. It's harmless pleasure and I'm booking it as such."

Miss Honeyfent would be struggling with her conscience in the Common Room. She found herself wishing that Mr. Cutspur would stop talking about differential salary scales, would call her Penny with resonant tenderness and take her into his fine golden furry arms.

What a wicked thought—in school hours too! It was bad enough that there was someone in heaven marking it down against her account; it was so much worse that there was herself down on earth striving not to give away the guilt which flushed through her.

She frowned and, as if that were not enough, she screwed up her face, urging her nose to meet her chin. As a gesture of nonchalance this was useless, for she had a firm, well-built chin and a nose which turned up, with petal-tender voluptuousness.

Nevertheless, William Cutspur sighed to himself as he talked. Why did she so often purse her lips, or with such a preoccupied air defile them with a cigarette when he was talking to her? Why was she so matter of fact, so objective—"prissy," some people said? Why did she put on those great specs as if it hurt her to look at you without them?

Miss Honeyfent, Honey, Punny, Penny, if only those gig-lamps would stop riding the infinitely desirable turn-up of your nose and you would smile and do a little step dance and say to hell with differential salary scales.

O Honey, Punny, Penny, they say you're shy, strict, reliable, keen on your career. Cut out, they say, to make a headmistress . . . if only . . .

William Cutspur had long since trained himself to think of one thing while talking of another. That was what made the teaching

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of elementary physics tolerable. One could be thinking most of the time about cricket, football, beer, or somebody quite unlikely, such as Miss Honeyfent.

He was an outdoor man. Down to earth, everybody judged, a good games master, not too bright, but all right with the elementary stuff.

He stopped talking about the differentials and said, "I hope you'll come and have a look at the game this afternoon, Miss Honeyfent. I'm fielding a masters' team and of course I'm playing myself."

"I'm afraid I shall be taking some extra tutorials, Mr. Cutspur."

"You ruin those girls with work," he laughed resonantly, his strong teeth taking a lion's grip of his pipe.

"We are hoping for a few honours and the exams are right upon us."

She was given to that daunting use of the royal "we." That, and the talk of honours, certainly daunted William Cutspur. There was no thought of honours in his classes. One or two of his boys had gone on to be capped as county players, which left him with satisfaction mixed with envy.

But in the life of the large mixed school where the differential salary scales so haunted thoughts in the Common Room, it was the work of Miss Honeyfent which shone, while he was one of the plodders. Nobody ever tipped him as a future headmaster.

He could find nothing to say in reply to Miss Honeyfent. The exams were right upon him, too, but the afternoon's game was nearer and more rewarding. "Too bad," he muttered, "about those exams, I mean . . . I often wonder if they really alter the courses of people's lives."

"But, Mr. Cutspur, they're quite vital to most of us."

It was not intended to sound like a rebuke, but the fine curly head bowed and the powerful body, which she always thought smelt of leather and buttercups, flinched. She had done it again: she had snubbed William Cutspur.

She sent up a mental note to the Recording Angel, a confused plea of apology and self-justification. Mr. Cutspur sometimes described the pupils as "those awful little toads," and was not always professionally sensitive. He would drink too much beer and talk scandalously about throwing in the towel, going to be a forester in Norfolk or taking a job as groundsman in the midlands. It surely could do no harm to let him see that there was a serious side to teaching. Such was her self-justification gambit.

On the other hand, it was perhaps wanton to enjoy the imagined perfume of leather and buttercups, to glance myopically

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at those fine golden furry arms when he came in from playing games, to admire him, not because he was clever and ambitious, but because he was quite the biggest of the junior masters.

She raised his stature to that of a Viking, a marauder who would rant through the purple twilight of the summer evenings after cricket, twanging a heathen harp, stamping upon the velvet sable of the night grass, challenging men to battle, enticing maidens to join fierce, sombre dances.

Miss Honeyfent's fantasies, as you see, were demanding. They could, in some measure, be compensated by large spectacles on her small nose or by that pursed-up face topped by a frown. Yet her nature was almost impervious to reality.

Her teaching, so highly praised, was like the knitting which more homely women took up and put down. The cherished career was but a uniform she wore every day. The pupils sitting in front of her were just so many blobs. Yes: blobs.

The school uniform was green, a pitiless green which owed nothing to nature or art. Some girls carried it off with a natural grace until they were about ten years old. After that, they all looked like grotesque abstractions of womanhood, like packages, symbols, or digits on a chart. Inside them, of course, a hot machinery of insurrection churned, powerhouses surging behind municipal shrubberies.

Miss Honeyfent was interested in teaching, not in girls. Her pupils shouldered their way into her consciousness from their nylon-upholstered, television-controlled, Formica-topped, neatly garaged, and amply bedroomed lives. Collectively they were coarse, tribal, herd-like. Individually, they were either sweet-natured and aloof, or sultry and prone to developing a " pash."

Miss Honeyfent was strict but considerate. She had been indoctrinated with psychology. She recognised and understood pash problems. She dealt with them with cool sweetness. She always coped. Yes, most of the time they were just a lot of blobs. Rows and rows of bucket-blobs she must fill by means of her acquired skill, her professional deftness.

She held these tutorials in a kind of office at the end of the corridor of the sun-swept block of buildings which had been designed, according to one appreciative critic, like a kite about to take off and soar.

Looking out of many of the windows of the block made her giddy and she enjoyed both the seclusion and the solidity of the tutorial room at the blind end of the corridor. She liked to put flowers there beneath the abstract painting thoughtfully supplied by the authorities.

The blobs came and went in twos and threes. They accepted

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her discipline, went in awe of her strictness, praised her fairness. Now and then, however, this nicely poised state of affairs would be thrown out by some boisterous or malevolent combination of blobs. Girls will be girls, she would sigh either to herself or, if it were serious, to the headmistress.

She had had her eye on Charity Pent for some time, scenting trouble. Charity was endowed with great gifts. She was effortlessly clever, brazenly beautiful, and came from a wealthy home, with meek, doting parents.

"Let's do something mad," she would lisp to her small admiring circle who surrounded her like poor relations. They would all dye their hair blue or orange, or all smoke pipes, or wear boys' caps.

Needless to say, Charity's pashes were spectacular and generous affairs. She lived up to her name with splendid ostentation. She had sent the head boy a gift of yellow silk braces, and for weeks afterwards kept stopping him to see if he had them on.

She had sent William Cutspur orchids in a transparent box with a set of very nicely-scanned verses. They were delivered by special messenger from the most expensive florist in the town to him in the pavilion during a very important school match.

Then she had taken it into her pretty head that Miss Honeyfent was kind and good and lonely, needing love and something to care for. So she arrived one day in a taxi with a large fluffy white rabbit in a well-appointed hutch. "Just a token of my undying affection, dear Miss Honeyfent."

"It's very sweet of you, Charity, but . . ." With cool, well-phrased tact, Miss Honeyfent went on to explain that she never accepted presents or gave them, and the rabbit went back by taxi that evening after half the school had been in to inspect it and hear the reasons for its appearance.

"It breaks my heart to think of our little Honeypot sometimes," Charity said after this incident. "Having such a drab humdrum sort of life with a conscience which won't even let her accept a fluffy white rabbit. One of these days we'll think of something mad. We'll give her something she can't give back."

The Recording Angel made a special note of that speech, partly because he agreed with it and partly because Charity was no idle boaster.

For a time, the final tests for the exams kept them all preoccupied. When Charity came through with distinction, her generous heart once more was opened to the solitary figure of her little Honeypot correcting test papers beneath the abstract painting in the room at the blind end of the corridor.

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" I shall give her what I most fancy myself," she announced to the admiring circle, and went about planning an operation which would have done justice to a guerilla leader or an experienced saboteur—depending of course on how you looked at it.

By inventing a dentist appointment for herself, she rearranged the Thursday evening extra-tutorials so that she should have the last session with Miss Honeyfent, which by custom ended with the drinking of coffee made by the pupil. She purchased two miniature bottles of vodka to add to the brew.

Having studied the movements and habits of Mr. Cutspur during the course of her pash, she knew that he would be leaving games practice on a Thursday evening to renew his manly vigour with a drink at a pub near the bus stop where there was a discreet side entrance. He could be intercepted.

" My plan, dears, is to give her Mr. Cutspur," Charity explained. " I would have liked him myself but, after the orchids, he seems a little scared. He told somebody that I was too sophisticated. Now it's all a question of timing . . ."

It was precise to the point of elegance, that timing. " Excuse me, Mr. Cutspur," said a sweating, distraught messenger. " It's Miss Honeyfent! " The messenger, thoroughly briefed, rolled her eyes and simulated a sort of sob.

" What's Miss Honeyfent? What is it ? " William Cutspur, never the most articulate of men, managed to gasp.

He was outdone by the messenger who, pointing towards the building which was like a kite about to take off and soar, croaked back, " She needs you, Mr. Cutspur."

She followed Charity's briefing to say nothing more but to break into a flurried run, pointing distractedly, until Mr. Cutspur followed her into the corridor with the blind end, when a whistle would be blown.

" Excuse me, Miss Honeyfent. I think that must be Mr. Cutspur. He said he needed you," said Charity, when she heard the whistle. She demurely put down the two cups of vodka-laced coffee.

" *Needs* me? " Miss Honeyfent pushed her specs into a firmer position and blinked round the room in a small panic as if there were something she ought to hide away.

Then there was William Cutspur, flushed, breathing very hard, smelling of leather and buttercups, saying, " Are you sure you're all right, Miss Honeyfent? "

There was silence in the room, some scampering in the corridor. Miss Honeyfent sent up a protest to the Recording Angel and said, " Quite all right. Have a cup of coffee now you're here and you could call me Penny if you like."

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Then she added, in a stricter voice, " But you'd better close the door. It's all slightly irregular . . ."

Charity and her friends could not of course hear the song in the heart of William Cutspur as it went O Honey, Punny, Penny, but they waited till they heard the key click in the closed door. By that time, the Recording Angel, smiling to himself, was very busy indeed.

On the Friday morning, Charity took it into her pretty head to arrive early to survey the scene of her triumph. On the table beneath the abstract paintings, she was gratified to discover, among the coffee cups, Miss Honeyfent's specs, not even folded up, and Mr. Cutspur's pipe, filled but not lit.

The Recording Angel got ready to award her a very black mark; but when Miss Honeyfent arrived, at once radiant and worried, Charity met her with the trophies in the corridor.

" I've washed up the coffee cups, Miss Honeyfent, and I thought I'd better hand you these before anybody arrived. They might get you sacked. You'll keep Mr. Cutspur, of course? Not send him back in a taxi, I mean? "

No cool, well-phrased tact greeted this sally. Miss Honeyfent put on her specs, but this did not conceal the two happy tears which filled her eyes. " Yes, thank you, Charity. I'll not send him back in a taxi."

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SHORT ARTICLE

Once he [Robert Benchley] had been trying to start a piece but couldn't get it under way, so he went down the corridor to where a poker game was in progress, just to jolt his mind into starting up.

Some time later, he returned to his room, sat down to the clean sheet of paper in the typewriter, and pecked out the word " The." This, he reasoned, was as safe a start as any, and might possibly break the block. But nothing else came, so he went downstairs and ran into a group of Round Table people, with whom he passed a cheerful hour or so.

Then, protesting that he had to work, he went back upstairs, where the small, bleak, " The " was looking at him out of the expanse of yellow paper. He sat down and stared at it for several minutes, then a sudden idea came to him, and he finished the sentence, making it read " The hell with it," and got up and went happily out for the evening.

NATHANIEL BENCHLEY, *Robert Benchley*

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THE MAN WHO SAW RED

Her image danced before him, mocking him, every way he turned

BY JOHN DAVIES

DARKNESS came to the city. More and more lights snapped on in the myriad windows of the great blocks of flats and soaring office buildings. In the nose-to-tail traffic, more and more drivers reached for their switches. The streets were speckled with a sliding, rippling brightness.

High above the street, a man sat motionless at his desk. The desk stood in a comfortable office. The floor was deeply carpeted. The desk was large and leather-topped. It was neat and tidy. The man was neat and tidy too. He had silver-grey hair. He was wearing an expensive, well-cut dark business suit. He was a handsome, well-groomed man.

He sat with his back to the window. He sat erect and very still in his swivel chair. His hands were clasped before him on the desk top. He was quite quiet. Only the whiteness of his knuckles and the blank stare of his pale blue eyes told of the whirling storm in his head.

Tonight the man at the desk was not a man any more. He was a psychopath, a killer lusting to kill. He had got to kill again. Tonight.

It was nearly six o'clock. Soon, in a very little while now, he was going to turn in his chair and look out of the window. He was going to look up at one of the top windows of the big block of flats opposite. He was going to look up there at exactly six o'clock, and he knew exactly what he would see. He would see the girl in the scarlet sweater.

She was always there at that time of the evening, and she never drew the curtains. Perhaps she felt that her room was too high up for it to be necessary, or perhaps she just liked to be able to look out at the lights of the city. She often stood at the window for quite a while. Sometimes the man felt that when she stood there like that, she was waiting for him.

He did not know her, but he had watched her every evening

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for a week. Every evening he had seen the flash of her scarlet sweater as she passed and repassed the window, or the hot blur of it as she stood at the window looking out. Every evening she was wearing the scarlet sweater, and, every time he saw it, it enraged him more. It was the colour of blood; the colour of the murderous mist in his brain.

And now, tonight, in a very little while, he was going to kill her. As he thought of it, he clasped his long-fingered hands tighter together, trying to feel how they would ache afterwards. Then he unlocked his hands and splayed the fingers wide. He smiled at them. They were beautiful hands. That was the way the girl would see them, just before they closed about her throat. He wondered if she would think they were beautiful too.

A clock chimed. Six. He drew in a deep breath. It was time to turn and look up at the window. He didn't know why he had had to wait for the stroke of the hour, but he did not question it. It was just one of the things he had to do. He had had to wait, but now it was time. He turned slowly in the chair, and looked up at the girl's window. She wasn't there. But he wasn't worried. There was a light. She would come.

She came. And she was wearing her scarlet sweater. He glimpsed it momentarily as she passed the window. A moment later she passed it again. Then, as was her habit, she came and paused there briefly, looking out. The scarlet of the sweater burnt like blood.

She disappeared once more. He waited. He would wait until he had seen her three more times, and then he would go to her. Then it would be time.

He didn't have long to wait. Not more than a minute later she passed the window three times in rapid succession. Just three. It was as though she knew the part she had to play, as though she too knew that her death that night was fore-ordained.

His fingers tightened on the chair. It was time to go.

He got up. Meticulously he dusted down his suit lapels with his long fingers and adjusted the neat knot of his tie. He took his coat from the stand and put it on. He ran his fingers over his smooth hair. Then he left his office and walked without hurry to the lift. He rang the bell and the car came sighing up.

On the way down, he chatted with the liftman, whom he had known for years. He inquired solicitously after the man's invalid wife. And all the time he was thinking, This will be the third time. He had killed twice already, and he hadn't been caught. How could he be caught? He had no motive for murder, except madness.

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The car reached street level. He bade the liftman a cheerful good night and walked out of the building. Outside it had begun to rain slightly. The street shone with reflected light.

In front of him a car screeched suddenly on the wet road. Its brakelights shone red. The smouldering redness in his brain burst through the mist and flared into a searing flame. He clenched his hands in his pockets until the nails bit painfully into the soft, white flesh of his palms.

He stood on the kerb, looking both ways. He crossed the street carefully when it was clear. He walked the few yards to the flats where the girl lived. He turned in through the entrance without hesitation.

He had not been there before. That would not have been fair. Before the kill, there had to be the hunt . . .

He walked towards the lift. The car was waiting. There was no liftman. He got in and pressed the button for the top floor. On the way up, he checked his bearings. It was easy enough. If he stood facing the lift doors, he was facing the front of the building. The girl's room was at the front, on the top floor.

The car stopped. The doors slid open. He stepped out. A short passage led directly away from the lift. He walked along it. It gave on to a longer corridor running right and left. He stopped and looked both ways. On the opposite side of the corridor numbered doors stretched away on either hand. The doors were quite close together, so it was as he had thought. They were very small flats, probably no more than one room and a bath. The girl would be alone.

There was nothing to tell him which of the doors was hers. But again he didn't hesitate. He turned and walked along the corridor to the left. Something would happen to lead him to her. He was going to kill her tonight. Nothing could prevent that.

Something did happen. When he was halfway along towards the end of the corridor, a girl came out of a door ahead. It was the girl in the scarlet sweater. He was pleased to see that she was a pretty girl, very young, with shining blonde hair. Someone called to her from inside the flat she had just left and she called back, laughing. She walked a few steps towards him, then went in through another door.

The man paused. He felt suddenly dizzy. Then the dizziness cleared. A fierce joy surged up inside him. He wanted to laugh too. He thought it would be nice if he and the girl could have a good laugh together about the whole thing. But he fought the impulse down. He walked towards the door by which the girl had gone in. He took his hands out of his pockets.

His fingers closed on the doorhandle. He opened the door.

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The girl was standing at the window, looking out. It amused him to think she was still waiting for him when he was already there. The girl turned as he came in. She gasped. He walked towards her with his hands raised in front of him, the long fingers splayed. He was smiling.

The girl's eyes widened. She stood frozen with fear. He reached for her throat. She did not move. His fingers caressed her throat lovingly before they closed. The girl screamed.

And then there came another scream. It came from the door. The man turned, his hands tight now about the girl's throat.

He could not believe what he saw. It seemed to him that the girl in the scarlet sweater was standing in the doorway. She was young and pretty, with shining blonde hair. Her eyes were wide, and she was frozen to the spot with fear.

The man was bewildered. How could she be standing there when he could feel her soft flesh bruising under his fingers?

Then the girl in the doorway screamed again. And the man's bewilderment became terror. Something seemed to snap in his brain. He felt himself whirling away into some dreadful nightmare.

His hands fell from the girl's throat. With a hoarse shout he turned and ran to the door. Now he wanted only to escape from this thing he didn't understand. He blundered into the girl there, and the very touch of her made his skin crawl with horror. He thrust her frantically aside and rushed past her.

He ran away along the corridor. He was running away from the lift, but he didn't know it. He was possessed only by a blind compulsion to get away.

A woman came out of one of the flats ahead. She was wearing a red housecoat. She was elderly, with grey hair, but he saw only the girl in the scarlet sweater. With a scream he turned and ran the other way.

Somehow he found the lift shaft. He pressed the button for the car. The eye above the button glowed red as the car came up. He shrank away from it.

The car came. He fled into it. He pressed the button. The car descended. At street level he thrust open the doors.

He rushed out into the street. He stopped abruptly, cowering back, as a woman in a red raincoat passed. He turned and ran madly away again from the girl in the scarlet sweater.

He had got to kill the girl in the scarlet sweater! But he could never kill her now. She danced before him, mocking him, every way he turned.

A car drew up to the kerb beside him. It was red. He stopped and shut his eyes, swaying. Then he ran on. Suddenly

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the neon sign of a cheap restaurant jumped out at him, scarlet in the night. He stopped as though he had been struck, then turned and staggered out across the street.

There was a sudden, desperate shrieking of brakes . . .

Two girls in white raincoats were walking towards the underground. They saw the little group at the crossing. They saw the ambulance, the police car, the dark form on the pavement.

"Some poor bloke," one of them said. They didn't take much notice. In the city accidents were always happening.

A man in the crowd said, "He rushed across just as the lights turned red. Must've been in a hurry to get somewhere."

The girls walked on. They reached the entrance to the underground. They went down and caught a train. They were going to the cinema.

They sat side by side.

"Sure you still want to go?" one of them said.

"Of course I do," the other said. "Why not? It's a good picture, isn't it?"

They were silent for a little while.

"Fancy a thing like that happening," the first one said.

"Just another barmy one," the other said. "The town's full of them."

They smiled at each other. They were young and resilient. And the picture was one they badly wanted to see.

It was warm in the underground. They took off their raincoats. They sat happily side by side. They saw the other passengers looking at them, but they were used to that.

They turned and smiled at each other again. They knew they were young and pretty. And it amused them to dress alike. They were proud of their scarlet sweaters. They were proud of being twins.

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Solution to LEISURE PLEASURE 2 in October Argosy

1. *Cattle battle*
2. *Chronic tonic*
3. *Forage porridge*
4. *Pedal medal*
5. *Humpty Dumpty*
6. *Cricket ticket*
7. *Risky whisky*
8. *Fiction diction*
9. *Humble grumble*
10. *Brittle skittle*
11. *Duller colour*
12. *Funny money*
13. *Pleasant present*
14. *Single tingle*
15. *Raisin basin*
16. *Frugal bugle*
17. *Sadder adder*
18. *Bony pony*
19. *Fiery diary*
20. *Gory story*

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BY VICTOR CANNING

Twinkle, Twinkle

THE whole thing began with Milky Waye talking one day in the smokeroom of the Minerva Club to Solly Badrubal and Jim O'Leary who was just back from a trip to Devonshire and five years of brisk moorland air.

Milky was a tall, distinguished-looking man with white hair, a little waxed moustache, and the kindly twinkle of a family lawyer in his eye. Solly was very short, very plump, very bald, but he had a big heart of the brightest alloy right on his sleeve. Jim O'Leary was tall, dark, hard, and brooding. He had no sense of humour at all. He'd thrown it away a long time ago as a hindrance.

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Milky Waye said to Solly, " I see your new film is having its premiere next week."

" That is so," said Solly.

" It will make a lot of money? " asked Milky.

" It would make more," said Solly, " if I did not have to pay that curly-headed child star, Angelo Downy, so much. And what it does make will be milked by tax."

Milky nodded, and then after a pause said, " A person is still entitled to arrange his financial affairs so that they do not attract taxation."

" As an accountant—struck off," said Solly, " you tell me a new angle."

Jim O'Leary stirred and reached for his whisky. " There's always some new graft with Milky."

" Quite right," said Milky. " It would need three of us. Save you thirty thousand pounds. You cut me in for five, and Jim for five. I've been giving it a lot of thought."

" Expound," Solly said. " I do not like being an overtaxed man."

Milky Waye said, " You have this Angelo Downy child who is a public figure."

" He is also a public menace."

" The boy is kidnapped and held to ransom for forty thousand pounds. Jimmy and I arrange that. You pay over the money and the rest is easy."

" I am not following you, Milky. So I pay over the money? "

Milky smiled. " We pay it back to you, but nobody knows this. So, you are not out of pocket except for ten thousand which we keep from the forty. Now, you have had to pay forty thousand pounds to get Angelo Downy back. He is a valuable asset to your company. The ransom money is a tax-deductible expense. Forty thousand pounds on which you would have had to pay surtax means that you have saved yourself about twenty-six thousand pounds to begin with. And you also have thirty thousand back that no one knows about. So you have made yourself fifty-six thousand pounds tax free."

" It's complicated," said Jim.

" It's not strictly accurate," said Solly. " Milky is dressing it up a little. Out of forty thousand pounds on which I would normally pay tax, I avoid tax altogether. I save, say twenty-six thousand pounds. I pay you ten. I am left with a net saving of sixteen thousand pounds."

" It is another way of looking at it," said Milky equably.

" We will look at it that way," said Solly. " But sixteen thousand is sixteen thousand, and I am for it.

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"The only condition is that the boy is not hurt. Don't tell me nothing but go ahead. It will be wonderful publicity for the film. But he is an awkward brat, and sharp as a pair of shears."

So the kidnapping of Angelo Downy was arranged. And for a hundred pounds share in the project, Milky and Jim O'Leary brought in Horace Head. Horace—an ex-pugilist—was so dull-witted that half the time he did not understand what was going on.

Angelo Downy was fifteen, he seemed about twelve, and had the mental equipment and temperament of a fallen angel with no regrets for the past. He looked like a miniature Italian tenor, dark curly hair, plump sun-warm cheeks, sloe-black eyes, a flashing smile for the public and cameras, and a permanent scowl at other times. At the end of a day's work or devilry he liked to relax with a large gin and bitter lemon and a cigar. If he had a passion in life, it was dogs.

At eight o'clock on the evening of the premiere of his film, *The Model Mother*, he was sitting alone in his room at the Leroy Hotel, dressed in a dinner-jacket, enjoying his gin and bitter lemon and cigar, and feeding biscuits to a loosely coordinated Gordon setter puppy of some eight months. The puppy which had a gold-and-diamond-studded collar round its neck was called, according to a gold medallion which hung from the collar, Prince Narrowmeath of Moortown. Angelo referred to him as Bugs, which the puppy seemed to prefer. Half an hour before, Angelo had stolen him from a room at the far end of the corridor. The door had been slightly ajar and Angelo had whistled gently and the dog had come to him.

There was a knock on the door and Solly Badrubal entered. He gave Angelo a precise good evening, took his gin and tipped it into a vase, and appropriated the cigar.

He said, "One of the press boys has to see you this way and your future is ruined. You are ready for the premiere?"

"No, I want to stay here with Bugs."

"This animal? We should ring for it to be taken away. We do not want any more dog trouble."

"He followed me. Can I help it? Besides he's going to the premiere with me and on the tour."

Solly considered this for a moment. After the premiere Angelo was being driven to the station to get a sleeper north for the beginning of a personal appearance tour. His bags had already been taken down to the waiting Rolls-Royce which was to take him first to the premiere then to the station.

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"O.K. You will travel alone in the Rolls. Make the big entrance. I will come behind."

Five minutes later, Angelo, smiling happily, leading Bugs, went through the foyer of the Leroy and out to the waiting Rolls-Royce.

The smile went from his face as he found himself flanked in the back seat by Horace and Jim. As the car drove off, Angelo said, scowling, "What the hell are you doing here?" Through the half-glass partition he shouted to the chauffeur, "Stop and kick these men out."

Milky turned and said to Jim O'Leary, "Smack his head and tell him to shut up."

Jim nodded, cuffed Angelo, and said, "A pleasure. Already I do not like him."

Horace giggled gently and patted Angelo's shoulder saying, "Don't mind Jim. That's a nice dog. Joints want kind of screwing up a bit, eh? Take up the play on the bearings."

"What is all this?" asked Angelo.

"Kidnapping," said Horace happily. "Gonna make a lot of money out of you. No rough stuff, though."

Angelo said nothing. As the car turned over Waterloo Bridge, he pulled out a cigar case and selected one, trimming the end with a gold clipper.

Horace watched him, fascinated. "Regular little gent you've become. Still cigars is bad, you know. For the wind. Got to keep fit." He banged his broad torso and the car echoed with a hollow sound.

"Muzzle him," said Angelo. And then to the back of Milky's head he said, "How much are you asking for me?"

Milky chuckled. "Forty thousand pounds."

Angelo chuckled too. "Solly will break a blood vessel."

"Since you're smoking," said Jim, "what about handing 'em round?"

Angelo, with a shrug, pulled out his case and selected two cigars which he handed to them. A few moments later the two cigars exploded in their faces.

Angelo leaned forward, resting his hands on top of Bugs' head, and laughed until the tears came. Jim brushed his waistcoat free of burning ends and leaned over and smacked Angelo's head hard.

Horace held up the shattered stub of his cigar, frowning, and said quietly, "Funny, ain't never had one do that before."

"Quiet back there," called Milky.

After about half an hour, when they were in the country, Angelo said suddenly, "I've been thinking. You could make it

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fifty thousand and cut me in for ten. Solly need never know. And for ten I'd cooperate."

From the front of the car Milky, without turning, said firmly, "For nothing you will cooperate."

Angelo just shrugged his shoulders, and after a while he hauled Bugs up on to his lap and they both went to sleep.

Horace looked over them to Jim and said happily, "Nice sight, ain't it? Boy and his dog. Kids have got to have pets."

"If he has a pet," said Jim, "it ought to be a snake. . ."

There is a little port in Hampshire called Brankfold. At one time the town had a small gaol attached to the old stone house of the Chief Constable. But after a time the gaol became so little used that it was decided to close it down and to sell the house and gaol.

Flint Morrish, for reasons that don't belong to this story, bought it. Flint decided to convert it into a private hotel. Most of the guests were members of the Minerva Club who wanted to get quietly away into the country for a while, and most of them appreciated the irony of living in a comfortably converted gaol. The outside of the building had been left as it was, iron-studded doors, barred windows to all the cells, and a surrounding wall with a formidable row of spikes. In the exercise yard Flint had made a nice little garden with a lily pool and goldfish and had settled down to living very happily. He had a wooden leg—the result of something going wrong with the gelignite in an early safe job—a beaming country squire kind of face, a passion for loud tweeds, and the greenest fingers in the country. It was as good and secluded a place to keep Angelo Downy as Milky Waye could think of.

Angelo was installed with Bugs in one of the converted cells. For the first day of his kidnapping, Angelo Downy was reasonably well behaved. He spent most of the morning reading the newspapers which carried headline stories of his kidnapping and his career, took Bugs for a walk round the small garden with Horace in attendance, and then lunched in his room.

Flint Morrish, having lunch with Milky and Jim, said, "Strikes me as a nice lad. Modest, no trouble."

Jim O'Leary said, "You wait."

That evening Angelo demanded a gin and bitter lemon to go with his cigar. Flint, oldfashioned about the training of children, refused him this. Ten minutes later Horace, who sat on guard outside Angelo's room, shouted, "Fire!"

They all rushed up to find that Angelo had set fire to the hangings of his bed and was sitting in a chair by the window, smoking his cigar, and watching his temporary home burn.

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Flint was furious at the damage to his best silk hangings, but Angelo got his drink. He also, when his dinner was brought up, refused to eat it. Lamb chops and green peas didn't appeal to him. He wanted an omelette of which he was especially fond: a cheese omelette laced with potted shrimps and shredded pimento.

Flint, a home-loving man, was also a good cook and—anxious to preserve his property from further damage—finally allowed Angelo to come down to the kitchen and make the omelette. Angelo, whose mother had been Italian, was a good cook. Flint and the others stood by while Angelo demonstrated his skill. The omelette completed, Angelo dined at the kitchen table and gave Flint some of the omelette to taste.

Flint rolled his eyes. "Delicious," he said.

"You like it?" Angelo's eyes beamed at Flint's appreciation. "If you like I'll make some more for you all."

He made omelettes for them, but at their first mouthfuls Flint and Jim jumped to their feet, roaring with fury and grabbing for glasses of water. They turned on Angelo with murder in their eyes. He had, surreptitiously, emptied a full tin of mustard powder into the omelettes. Milky, who had delayed touching his omelette, got between Angelo and the two men.

"No violence. Remember. He's money. But mark him and he'd be left on the shelf in a clearance sale."

Horace, still eating at table, looked up and said, "What's all the fuss? Best omelette I ever had. Minds me of a curry thing my old lady used to make."

"Take the boy up to his room," said Flint quietly. The colour had gone from his ruddy squire's cheeks and he was rapping the end of his wooden leg against the floor in an angry tattoo.

The kidnapping arrangement was that in four days' time Solly Badrubal would send the ransom money by one of his clerks to Southampton where Flint would meet the man in a café. At first Solly had wanted to send only the ten thousand pounds due to Milky and Jim—out of which they would pay Horace his hundred, and Flint five hundred for the use of his house. Milky had pointed out that since Solly's clerk would be an honest man he would spot in the hand-over that there was only ten thousand. All the papers had blazoned the sum of forty thousand, and the risk of the discrepancy leaking out could be dangerous. Reluctantly Solly had agreed to send the full amount.

Before the four days had passed, they had some very bad

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moments with Angelo. The boy was allowed the freedom of the garden and, to pass the time, he took to training Bugs to fetch and carry things. He'd walk the setter around teaching it to carry a bag, a newspaper, make it fetch a ball, come back and sit and drop it at the command of word or whistle. Naturally both boy and dog got bored at times with lessons, and then they would get the wind up their tails like all young and go romping all over the place. Flint's flowers suffered. Bugs dug holes in the lawn, and quite a few of the garden dwarfs had their heads knocked off. The survivors had black pencilled moustaches.

And Angelo was a dedicated practical joker. All of the men suffered. The details of their suffering are unimportant. They suffered. But the refrain—from Angelo—which went with it, left them cold. He would cooperate if they cut him in on a share of the ransom. They were prepared to suffer almost anything rather than cut him in.

Before two days had passed, Flint was shattered by the state of his house and beloved garden. On the second night, after some thought, he telephoned a friend of his who was a sea captain working a small cargo ship out of Southampton.

Two days later, when Flint returned from his rendezvous in Southampton, he informed the others that the messenger with the money hadn't turned up. Milky Waye telephoned Solly Badrubal and was indignantly told that Solly had sent off the money, even seen the man on the train. Solly, panicking about his money, wanted to know what was going on down there. Milky Waye, suffering from a cold from opening a door and having a bucket of water fall on him, sneezed violently into the phone and, advising Solly to keep his hair on, told him that he'd have to look into things.

Back in the kitchen, he questioned Flint again about the messenger. "Flint, you aren't pulling a fast one, are you?"

"Not me," said Flint. "But that messenger is. I'll take a hundred to one on it. He comes down with the money and gets the first boat out of Southampton. He's on his way to South America now."

Which was true, of course, for Flint had arranged it with his captain friend at the price of a couple of hundred quid. But the clerk didn't have the money. Flint had it. It was a fair return, he thought, for all the trouble and damage caused by Angelo.

"What about Angelo?" asked Horace, who was peeling potatoes for the evening meal.

"Send him back to Solly," snapped Jim. "This whole thing is sour."

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"What about Solly?" asked Milky Waye. "He could make trouble for us."

Flint produced a large decanter of whisky from the kitchen cupboard. "We've got to think carefully about Solly," he said.

When Angelo came down about an hour later for his supper, he found that they had done all their thinking and had passed out. The four of them were slumped unconscious around the kitchen table.

Angelo, whistling happily, made himself an omelette, pushed Jim O'Leary off his chair to the floor, and sat down to make a leisurely meal. He was in no hurry. The knockout drops, which he always carried in his case and which he had dropped into the whisky, would keep an elephant out for two hours.

After his supper, Angelo took Bugs into the garden and knocked off the heads of the remaining dwarfs. He came back and went through the pockets of the four men, clearing their watches and wallets. In Flint's pocket he found a letter from the captain of a cargo ship, sailed that day from Southampton, which interested him very much. He took Flint's keys and went up to Flint's bedroom and found his safe behind a nice watercolour entitled *A Distant View of Dartmoor*. Inside the safe was a leather briefcase containing thirty-eight thousand and eight hundred pounds in notes, and a message from Solly which read:

What a wonderful scheme! Hope this will make all the boys happy. S.

Angelo went back to the kitchen and allowed himself an extra cigar and another gin and bitter lemon while he thought things over. All he had to do now—and he took his luck quite calmly—was to let himself out of the house with Flint's key and get back to London and bank the money. He could turn up at his hotel and say that three men, unknown to him, had dropped him on Waterloo Bridge.

It was a little after midnight before he left. At the last moment his sense of humour got the better of him . . .

An hour later Angelo, with Bugs at his heels, was well on his way out of Brankfold and following a road which had been sign-posted Southampton twenty miles. Once he hit a main road it wouldn't be long before he found an all-night lorry café and could hop a lorry to London. He took his time. The night was fine. When he got tired of carrying the briefcase he handed it to Bugs who trotted along by his side carrying it proudly.

The four men in the kitchen came back to life more or less within a few minutes of each other. There was a great deal of groaning and stretching and muzzy shaking of heads.

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Flint struggled to his feet, took a step forward, and fell flat on his face—his shoelaces were tied together. Jim O'Leary followed him, repeated the act, and then cursing, stood up and had his trousers concertina around his ankles—his braces had been cut. He let out a bellow of rage which brought Horace to life. He stared blearily at Jim and then said, puzzled, "Must have dozed off." He broke off as, rising, he tripped over his tied laces and crashed to the ground.

"That boy!" A great wail of anger came from Jim.

"My wallet!" cried Milky.

"My watch!" roared Jim.

"Something wrong with my braces," said Horace.

"My flamin' keys." This from Flint. And then as they sorted themselves out, an angry bellow of apprehension came from Flint. Holding his trousers up, he stumped rapidly out of the room. While he was gone, the others sorted themselves out and Milky, the practical one, fished a length of clothes-line from a cupboard and they fashioned belts for their trousers.

After a time, Flint came back. He stood in the doorway and surveyed the company with a grim look on his rubicund face. "Gentlemen," he hissed, "this is serious. The boy is gone."

"Thank God," sighed Jim.

"He's gone and he's taken forty thousand nicker of ransom money with him," said Flint. And then as they looked amazed at him, he went on, "I know. Explanations are due."

"I'll say," said Milky. "You had the money all the time."

"I did. I was going to do a fair split with you all. We'd have racked up ten thousand each. It was practical common-sense."

"Except," said Jim threateningly, "you'd never have told us if this hadn't happened. I ought to do you."

"That's beside the point," said Flint. "Angelo's away with the money."

Milky said, "Let me think. He won't go to the police. Not with all that money on him. He'll want to get it safely tucked away."

"What would you do if you were him?" asked Flint.

Jim said, "It's obvious. He's on the road. Going to get a stowaway on a lorry."

Horace said, "I still can't understand. I never passed out on whisky before."

They ignored him.

Ten minutes later, they were all in Flint's car heading away from Brankfold on the only road which Angelo could have taken from the town. It was summer and already the sky was

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beginning to lighten. In another hour it would be full daylight.

Fortunately for them, after a few miles Angelo had developed a blister on his heel and was reduced to a very slow hobble. Bugs now carried the briefcase permanently and was getting tired of his duties.

They caught him up after about half an hour on a long open stretch of road. As the car pulled up alongside him, Angelo recognised them. He gave a whistle to Bugs to follow and slipped through the hedge. Forgetting his blister now, he put on a burst of speed which would have made his dog-thief father proud of him.

Flint said to Horace at the wheel of the car, " The road bends back at right-angles a couple of miles up. You go on to the bend and wait for us. We'll follow him."

The three of them crashed through the hedge and were after Angelo in full cry. Horace completely out of his depth shook his head and drove on.

It was a lovely morning for a hunt. Jim O'Leary led, going like the wind, with murder in his heart; Milky Waye followed him closely, wondering if he hadn't been losing his financial grip of life since he hadn't thought of the doublecross which Flint had so nearly pulled off; and behind came Flint, stumping away with his wooden leg, and cursing.

Angelo kept up his speed for about five minutes and then began to slacken. Ahead of him he saw a range of farm buildings rise over the hedges. A few seconds later he was in a farmyard. He darted for a long low building, hoping to hide.

With Bugs at his heels, he raced up to one of the buildings, jerked open the door, and leapt in. Immediately there was an explosion of white feathers and three hundred laying hens, disturbed at their breakfast, hit the ceiling and let out a cacophony of cackles which could be heard a mile away. Angelo streaked through the building towards a door at the far end. But the door was locked and bolted.

Turning to go back to the other door, he saw Jim O'Leary come racing in. Angelo, ploughing his way through hens that would be egg-bound for a month from the shock, headed for a window on the far side of the house, jerked it open, and was through. Bugs followed him with a leap that was considerably hampered by the briefcase he carried. Angelo turned and slammed the window down on Jim's fingers as he grabbed at the sill.

Jim reeled back, letting out a wail of anguish, and collapsed into a drinking fountain. The next moment Milky Waye and Flint came charging into the building.

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Jim leapt up, shouting, "Back to the door. Don't let the little bleeder get away!"

But as they turned to the door, it was blocked by a man in breeches, tall, burly, and angry-faced, and he was holding a double-barrelled shotgun.

"A fine do, eh?" he roared. "Brazen-faced, daylight robbery! Ernie!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Get on the phone to the police—I'll hold 'em here!"

And he did. A twelve-bore shotgun was not to be treated lightly . . .

Half a mile away, Angelo saw a line of telegraph poles which marked a road. He headed for them, climbed a paling fence, and found himself in a garden with a path leading up to the doorway of a red-tiled house with latticed windows. As he approached, the door began to swing open. Knowing that even in these bucolic depths his face was film and television familiar, he leapt aside into a shrubbery and began to make a detour round the house.

Bugs, fagged out by carrying the briefcase and wondering how long it would be before Angelo took a spell of it, headed straight up the path to the doorway. Here he was confronted by a portly, benign-faced gentleman with a clerical collar who looked down at him and said, "Well, bless my soul! A dog."

At this moment, a hundred yards away, Angelo discovered that Bugs was no longer with him. He gave a whistle for Bugs, low and piercing.

Bugs, very tired, dropped the case at the old gentleman's feet, and with a bark of relief was away after Angelo.

Five minutes later Angelo hit the main road, only to find Horace waiting in the car. But Horace was a different cup of tea from the others. Angelo climbed into the seat alongside him and said, "It's all right, Horace. Just drive me to London."

"London?"

"That's right. It's been arranged with the others." Angelo leaned back and opened the rear door for Bugs to jump in.

Horace shrugged his shoulders. He'd never been the master mind in any job, just a leg-man. He was used to doing as he was told. So he started to drive Angelo to London, and after a few miles Angelo discovered that Bugs no longer had the briefcase. He was pretty upset about this but he kept it to himself. Anyway, he consoled himself, he had enough on Solly over this phoney kidnapping to blackmail him into a handsome payment for the sake of keeping his tiny mouth shut.

Somewhere in the suburbs of London, Angelo and Bugs began to be hungry. Angelo made Horace stop the car outside

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a café and, leaving Bugs with Horace, went in to buy some biscuits and sandwiches. As he came to the door to return to the car he saw that a motorcycle policeman had drawn up alongside Horace and Bugs. An interesting conversation was going on.

"Nice to see you, Horace," said the policeman. "Thought you was still inside."

"No, I ain't."

"Nice dog you got there. Nice collar, too, gold with diamonds stuck in it. Up to your old tricks, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"As though you don't know. This here is Prince Narrowmeath of Moortown. He was lifted from the Leroy Hotel some time back. Brazen you are. Now then, just you follow me down the road to the station and we'll sort it out."

Angelo at this point withdrew into the café and made for the back door.

Well, there it is. Crime doesn't pay when a lot of rogues try to do one another down. Solly Badrubal lost forty thousand quid, plus another five he had to pay to Angelo to keep his mouth shut. Horace got four months, and the others three.

The only person who was really happy was the vicar at whose feet Bugs had dropped the briefcase. He took it back into the breakfast-room, opened it up, and then with a great beam on his face turned to his wife and said, "You know, my dear, it is a wonderful world. A world of miracles. Here have I been for years and years trying to raise money for my Church Youth Camps and suddenly all I want is dropped on my doorstep by a dog."

"A dog, my dear?"

"An exceptional dog, of course, my love. Owned obviously by someone of great wealth. It had a gold collar with some kind of stones—probably diamonds—decorating it. It dropped the money at my feet and then, distantly, I heard its owner whistle, and away it went. So romantic, so generous. Obviously he wished to remain anonymous. But with the money was a note which made his intention clear. Listen to it. *What a wonderful scheme! Hope this will make all the boys happy.* Oh, it will. It will. Bless him!"

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POUR THING!

"It's raining cats and dogs outside."

"I know—I just stepped into a poodle."

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His body is perfectly spherical
He weareth a runcible hat . . .

EDWARD LEAR

" There is, for example, the Marquise de Fleury, for three years *en suite* she is suffering losses the most crushing at the Grand Prix . . . This year she came to me: " Madame Marcelle, give me one of your creations for the Grand Prix. My friend, Madame de Periere-Picon, declares that for her your hats are always *mascotte*." " Soit, madame," I reply. I search, I reflect, I find her colour, *et voilà* Madame la Marquise who touches last Sunday her five hundred thousand francs at Longchamps! "

CONSTANCE MAUDE, *An English Girl in Paris*

Wideawake

There was an old person of Fratton
Who would go to church with his hat on.
" If I wake up," he said,
" With my hat on my head,
I shall know that it hasn't been sat on."

ANON

Heady Mixture

There were fresh bursts of crackers; a staccato series of reports which continued uninterrupted and came closer until the sound enveloped the pavilion. Acrid smelling smoke rose thinly and hung outside on the verandah and through the smoke Suki came with tiny, stylised footsteps. She was dressed in black silk pyjamas and wore a wide-brimmed pointed straw hat over her head.

PAUL SCOTT, *The Chinese Love Pavilion*

" Where did you get that hat?
Where did you get that tile?
Isn't it a nobby one, and just the proper style?"

JAMES ROLMAZ, *Where Did You Get That Hat?*

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Hat Trick

"A proper beauty! And it touches your heart to see her riding in her carriage with her old governess."

The "old governess," was in fact none other than Napoleon himself, the naive Parisian having being misled by the Emperor's yellow complexion, his "Spanish" costume of gold-embroidered satin, his cloak sprinkled with golden bees, and above all his black velvet hat studded with eight rows of diamonds and topped with three white feathers... This ridiculous hat had been "put on and taken off" several times, and "a good many positions" had been tried before it bore any resemblance to a piece of masculine headgear. The final effect was anything but successful, yet the Emperor seemed to be delighted with his appearance.

ANDRE CASTELOT, *Napoleon's Son*

Skid Lid

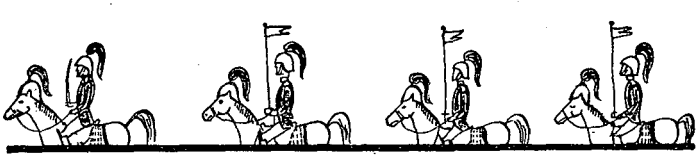
When ski-ing in the Engadine
My hat blew off down a ravine.
My son, who went to fetch it back,
Slipped through an icy glacier's crack
And then got permanently stuck.
It really was infernal luck:
My hat was practically new—
I loved my little Henry too—
And I may have to wait for years
Till either of them reappears.

HARRY GRAHAM, *Patience*

'shun Shades!

When passing the Horseguards in Whitehall I have often been distressed to note that, whereas the mounted sentries are sheltered from the sun by their boxes, their horses have no such protection for their heads. Would it not be in accordance with our reputation as an animal-loving nation if these horses were provided with hats? They could be smartly bound in the regimental colours.

Letter in The Times



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★ *An ARGOSY "first"—*

THE DESPOILER

BY PETER STEELE

A HUGE fire blazed at the end of the hall. A dozen flares burnt in brackets on the side-walls, fitfully illuminating the long dark building. A cold wind blowing straight off the sea roared in the stone chimney and blue smoke eddied round the rafters of the straw-thatched roof.

From his vantage point on one of the mighty oak cross-beams, Alward, squatting in almost total gloom, could sniff the rich, resiny scent of the pine-torches and the familiar aroma of beech-logs, cut in the spinney. His heart swelled with yearning. He felt hot tears spring to his eyes as he smelled that smoke and gazed down into the vividly-remembered hall with the huge, roughly-cut oak table and benches, the green rushes strewn on the packed-earth floor, and the window in the southern wall which had been made for his father so that the old man could sit and watch the ships come up to Chichester. Yes, this was his home.

He was half ashamed of his emotion. He was getting like one of those barbarian Welshmen.

His enemy would sit in that armed chair before the fire. He would sit there drinking the ale brewed by the tenants of the rightful owner, Alward Fulkson, eating the pork and beef pastured on his green meadows and the sweet, nutty bread baked in his ovens. He would sit there, laughing and relaxed, assured of his safety as he sat in another man's home and called it his own.

From this great cross-beam he, Alward Fulkson, would loose the shaft which would rip through his enemy's flesh and pin him to his chair. He would choke and cry out in agony, hideous pain contort his ugly face and bright blood spurt over his clothes.

Yes. One smooth, easy action, the thwack of ringing raw-hide on his bracer; and then the fitting end of his ravager and despoiler.

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Alward's mind revolted with disgust and helpless fury when he recalled that bitter day—five years ago—when he had crossed paths with the Norman. Only by dwelling on his carefully nurtured schemes of vengeance could he bear to recall the dark circumstances.

The Normans had come to Westhampnett on a beautiful day in the autumn of that fateful year, 1071 of Our Lord. There had been his enemy and the Sheriff of Arundel—since the year of Senlac Hill, Alward had held his lands of the Earl of Arundel.

In that year Arundel had been given the county of Shrewesbury together with Letters of Mark from the King permitting him to carve out a principality for himself in Wales—thus putting him among the three most powerful magnates in England and Normandy after William the Bastard himself.

The man who displaced Alward in the first instance was an important baron, and he in his turn granted the property to the man Alward loathed. A manor like Westhampnett was worth forty days' knight-service a year and although the baron normally drew a monetary substitute from his Saxon tenant, here at Westhampnett he decided to establish a vassal who could act as a lieutenant on campaign.

The man he chose was granted Westhampnett and given several revenues and promised a good share of the plunder in Wales. His name was Nigel.

Nigel had been superbly assured as he came riding along the road from the Downs, a squat figure in grimy mail loosely sitting a huge, rawboned warhorse. He came into view as he left the nearer spinney, the Sheriff to the Earl at his side and the ecclesiastics behind them. Two troopers in hood and tunics of tough, boiled leather over suits of fustian carrying painted spears and bucklers and four foot men, similarly armed and dressed, each with an assortment of knives at their belts, brought up the rear. They were a tough, not altogether uncolourful band of brigands.

The Churchmen were marvellously tall, lean individuals in long black robes; the ugly bunch of mercenaries were laughing and talking excitedly as they leered at the women working in the fields; and the Sheriff, in feathered bonnet with his robes of office over his mail, would surely have caught and held the eye had not Nigel been there.

The fellow had an arrogant air as he sat easily in the saddle, surveying the broad acres of corn and meadow, which were soon to be his, as if he already owned the place. From that moment Alward hated Nigel with a burning, unquenchable hatred, and yet

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there was in the man a quality that commanded respect and reluctant admiration.

Swiftly, the brutal legal process was gone through. Heavily-sealed writs were produced. Alward barely comprehended the ponderous Latin deed of transfer which one of the clerks read out, intoning as if chanting a Mass. The ceremony was over a full minute before his numbed senses could register the terrible fact. He stared blankly at this Nigel who was so calmly taking over his property.

At last he cried out in Norman-French—for he had been a carl of Edward the Norman-lover before he had sworn fealty to Harold Godwinson—protesting at the legalised injustice of it all.

" I was a great landowner before you came; a loyal servant to my liege. First you stole Halnaker—my lovely manor—and now you take everything I have left. Have I not paid my shield-money and Church-tax? I am a nobleman. How can you beggar me? "

During this angry outburst Nigel had been silent, gazing impassively over his manor. At last he turned and said calmly, " You talk too much, Saxon. If you refuse to be my reeve, I give you until dusk to load up an oxcart I will sell you, and then you must get off my estates." Alward was silenced, and one of the troopers guffawed.

Then Nigel noticed Githa who was standing behind her husband. His steely blue eyes stripped the clothes from her ripe young body and although he did not move in his saddle she felt the naked lust which seized him.

" Go," said Nigel to Alward, caressing Githa with his eyes.

He saw desire swelling the muscles of the ugly Norman face, yet there was an air of command about Nigel which he could not but obey. He slunk, defeated, into the house but when Githa tried to follow him she was ordered to stay. She had obeyed. He had obeyed. Alward was not afraid of Nigel—a huscarl of Harold Godwinson feared no man on earth—but he was helpless as a man is helpless when from birth he has been taught to recognise and obey his superiors. He walked, dazed and sick with anger into the hall—when suddenly Githa screamed.

She was on Nigel's horse, cradled in his shield while he smothered her screams with a gauntleted hand. Her bodice was ripped from neck to waist and her soft white flesh was pitted with red marks from Nigel's mail. Overcome with fury he hurled himself at the Norman like a wild animal. Nigel waited an instant then swung his horse round, knocking the raging Saxon flying. Bruised, he ran in again, but Nigel's foot had struck out and he was hurled to the ground, stunned and bleeding. He

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cursed helplessly as he lay, hearing the sniggers of the mercenaries and seeing the stupid, open-mouthed faces of his villagers.

"This is a pretty wench," said Nigel. "I claim her by droit de seigneur."

"She is my wife."

"Pah. Your concubine more like or your handfast wife—I know the barbarous English customs."

"I wedded her."

"When?" It was the Sheriff speaking.

"In the year of King Edward's death."

"After the usurpation of Harold Godwinson?"

"After the coronation."

"In that year his Holiness the Pope did declare this Church in England schismatic and corrupt. I appeal to you, Father, was the rite efficient?"

One of the priests stroked his long chin.

"After the coronation, so-called, you had sworn fealty to this usurping oath-breaker, Harold Godwinson, and therefore shared in his sin. As his legal vassal the Holy Church cannot extend to you its infinite compassion or declare binding your Christian rights. The marriage was a mockery of the sacrament. Look to your soul, my son, and repent of your grievous sins."

The Normans were then convinced that Nigel was doing a pious deed in stealing Githa from him. It was God's work. He could do no more than bury his bloody face in the ground and weep at the monstrous injustice of it all.

"I am a merciful man," said Nigel with patent untruth. "I shall not punish you for attacking me in just defence of my rights. Go freely where you will. Conduct him to the boundary, Payn."

One of the horsemen urged him to his feet with shrewd jabs of his spear and drove Alward stumbling and weeping before him. As he went, the shrieks of Githa were daggers twisting in his soul.

He ran. Ran for hours until he could go no farther. Not caring where he was, he sank exhausted at the foot of a tree in the great oak forest which mantled the Downs.

He woke, stiff and sore, his wounds a mass of congealed blood. He picked himself up and wandered blindly along the northern foot of the Downs away from the rising sun. He had no idea of his destination. On and on he tramped, keeping to the dark, friendly woods where the light of day could not shine on him nor men mock at his shame.

He lived in this fashion for days, crossing many streams and rivers, gradually moving north to find the fords and avoid areas of habitation. During all this time he starved on a diet of roots

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and stolen ears of grain, until at last he came to a river he thought was the Severn. Beyond was the land of the South Welsh, a wild, forested area not yet reached by the Norman Marcher Earls.

The Welsh hated Englishmen. Once across that river his life was worthless. He did not care. Better to die obscurely in Wales than to come up once more against the hypocritical justice of the Normans who would doubtless take him for a runaway serf. Weak with hunger and exposure, he forded the Severn at the lowest point and plunged into the wilderness beyond. Three days later, almost dead, he collapsed on a hill in the lands of the Prince of Gwent.

But the Welsh did not kill him. Old Mad Gwyneth, who was accredited with supernatural powers, found him. She nursed him back to health in her hut, a crumbling wooden structure full of skulls, stone jars, bundles of herbs, and birds which flew in through the open door to steal food from the old witch's table. With her shrewish tongue she kept her angry menfolk at bay. He soon recovered his bodily strength, but not his pride which Nigel had wounded.

It became a spur of vengeance.

Once, as he prowled alone near the palisade of the little village, a young Welshman in his cups spat in his face. He felled the fellow with one blow and would certainly have killed him had not the other men held him back. He had struggled, blasphemed, and screamed while veins started out of his white skin until he fought himself free. They respected him after that. Soon they had even more reason.

One spring day he was out with a shepherd on the hills when three troopers rode up the valley led by a mailed warrior. The probing fingers of the Norman conquest had caught up with him again. Hurling a huge boulder, he had leapt into their midst with the club he carried to protect the flock from wolves. Fighting like a demon he killed them all, scarcely sustaining a scratch. He had beaten the knight until he could lift his club no more.

The Welsh came to consider the Saxon, with his savage temper and hatred of the Normans, to be a magician, for surely the slayer of mailed knights who did not himself receive any wound must be aided by supernatural powers!

Throughout the lands of Gwent, Dheu-Barth, Morgannwg, and even Dywed and Ceredigion, his fame spread to the remotest villages and men walked for days merely to gaze at the great warrior with his huge yellow beard and mad, pale blue eyes.

During the five years he spent fighting alongside the Welsh he nursed his need for vengeance, maturing it as if it were rare wine, until helpless hatred became planned revenge. Now

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he was ready. Wearing a monkish habit to protect him from molestation and carrying his mighty elm-bow unstrung so that people should think it was merely a curiously-shaped staff, he started on his return journey.

Alward's nerves tensed as from his point of vantage on the cross-beam he saw somebody had entered the hall. But it was only a young servant, staggering beneath the weight of a cask of ale which he placed near the foot of the table. Alward's breath hissed out and he slipped the arrow back in its quiver as the young Saxon passed below him and went out. As he continued to keep watch, Alward's angry thoughts turned again to the lands stolen from him.

He had loved Halnaker and Westhampnett with all the fierce love a man has for the lands which are his own. He had loved the fields, whether rustling with white corn or bared by the ploughman. He had loved the lush green pastures with the lowing cattle and the shady woods where he grazed his fat hogs.

His yearning for Githa was not so simply explained. She was the daughter of a Graffham thane whom he had seen when he went to visit his father's brother who was curate of that village. He had fallen in love with her strong, slender body, her thick golden hair, and her fine cornflower-blue eyes. He had married her in the little church at Graffham. Then for a few blissful months he had lived in a sort of heaven with his bride. He was now Lord of his Manor and had a beautiful bride with soft, sweet lips and firm well-favoured figure and milky skin that blushed a beautiful pink when he gazed upon it. What greater happiness could there be!

He had come back from Hastings to find his world in ruins. Harold Godwinson and the gallantry of England lay dead on Senlac Hill and Norman William had been crowned in London while—so they said—his knights cut down citizens in the streets and the city burnt. A few weeks after his return Halnaker had been seized.

But Westhampnett remained, and he found the fierce pleasure he derived from Githa in some ways recompensed him for his grievous losses. In the years that followed she bore him five children—three of whom survived. Her waist thickened and her breasts grew heavy, although they were still proud and high. Her love was a warm, strong refuge between him and the world. To feel her yield to him could blot out every harsh memory.

To be shamed in the eyes of a woman as he had been shamed before Githa was enough to destroy anyone. He had to blot out that memory with the spectacle of Nigel's agony.

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During the long days tramping across England he had nursed his painfully conceived plans of revenge. He spent the final night in Chichester in a tavern near the Abbey Church. In the pale dawn light, he passed through the East Gate and set off eagerly up grassy Stane Street towards his home. The prospect of his enemy barely three miles away stirred him as sensual pleasure. He knew the same keen, tense physical emotion he had felt before battle.

He had discarded his cowl and now wore only a cloak over his Norman mail-shirt and the sword at his belt. A quiverful of arrows and a good Saxon helmet were wrapped in the bag he carried over his shoulder. He had on thick leather breeches and boots, well bound to his calves. Once more he was an English fighting man. Not since Senlac Hill had he stepped out so joyfully and confidently.

An hour later he was hiding in his old spinney. It was a clear, crisp spring day and he wept for joy to see once more the ploughed fields and the cattle on the pastures. Near him a dozen fat pigs grubbed for roots and slept in little hollows they scraped out of the earth. All day he lay there until dusk. Then like a grey ghost he flitted to the nearest homestead.

Inside one of the peasant huts, old Picot was sitting down to barley-bread and coarse beer. As his true lord burst in, his mouth gaped open, displaying an unwholesome vision of shrunken gums. Alward gave him his orders. He was to gather the cottars, armed with clubs and scythes. They were to assemble outside the house and when Alward cried out they were to burst in and kill every Norman there.

Picot gaped at him, his face blank.

" Oi'll tell the men, master, and we'll be there."

" Good man," said Alward, turning to go.

" You'm roight lucky, master. Lord Nigel cum back from Arundel only yesterday. Oi do 'ear as 'ow 'e's bin in foreign parts a-foightin' the Welsh. 'E's bin gone four years cum Michaelmas and Lady Githa's bin with un."

Not trusting himself to speak, Alward went swiftly out into the night and crept towards the manor house.

In the shadows of the northern palisade he donned his helmet, his bracer, and his leather drawing-glove and tossed his cloak into a bramble-patch. He then groped his way into the empty hall and climbed to his hidden vantage-point on the cross-beam.

Tonight he would win back Westhampnett and regain his manhood. As his villagers poured into the hall he would leap from the cross-beam and kill and kill until not one of his despoilers remained alive. Then he would take Githa in his bloody arms.

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There would be a feast, singing and brawling and, at the end of it all, he would take his wife to their bedchamber and once again make love to her.

His head swam . . . He would lead his men on Halnaker . . . He would lead a Saxon rising until every Norman was dead—be he soldier, priest or clerk—every Norman castle held by a Saxon, and every new monastery a blazing ruin. He would avenge Senlac Hill. He would watch an English Archbishop crown the Atheling—he, Alward Fulkson, would be the first earl to swear fealty to King Edgar . . . He smiled as his mind juggled.

Alward stiffened and notched an arrow on his bow-string. Gently, he drew the bow to his cheek several times to limber his muscles. Outside men were laughing and shouting and soon some forty men and women began to pour into the hall.

He strained his eyes to examine these people. The priest was a Norman all right, and he recognised the repellent features of the trooper Payn; a few of the other soldiers too looked like foreigners. But, incredible though it was to him, the rest of the men, including the reeves, and all the women were Saxon. All were laughing and shouting, the men toasting the women with the beer the servants were lavishly distributing. He saw a Breton and a Saxon trooper exchange amiable blows like a couple of bear cubs and then compete to see who could most swiftly empty large leather flagons of ale.

He gripped the stave of his bow until his knuckles gleamed in the dim light. A red veil began to film his vision and a terrible hammer pounded in his head. Englishmen serving the Norman bastard, and not only serving him but revelling in his hospitality . . . With a mighty effort he controlled his fury. These traitors would receive their reward sooner than they thought.

The company was rising. Two figures were slowly progressing up the hall towards the fire. A squat, grizzled man with a round head; on his arm a large, golden-haired woman with skin like driven snow.

Alward's lips curled back in a wolfish grin. Nigel de Westhampnett was walking his last.

The couple took their places at the head of the table and stood as the priest thinly intoned grace. Githa was very large. Yet, plump and huge-bosomed, she was still pleasant to look upon. Alward was glad. He had grown tired of the delicately-made Welsh maidens. This was his wife, built for child-bearing. He wondered then for the first time if his three baby sons were still alive . . .

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Githa was happy. She smiled at Nigel as he offered her meat and wine. She was now quite recovered from her last pregnancy. Her new lord had fathered two fine lusty sons on her.

She was glad to be back in Sussex. When Nigel had taken her to Shrewesbury she had thought she would never again wish to see the home where she had been torn from her beloved Alward. But, over the months, she had found herself passionately in love with the man who had ravished her.

His eyes streaming tears of anger, Alward raised his bow, drawing the shaft to his ear. The string cracked against his bracer. The arrow flew, true to its target. A dreadful scream rent the air. The company was petrified. Within seconds three more were dead.

His senses blind with fury, Alward yelled, "Peasants—to me!" and leapt down on the great banqueting table in the midst of the hall.

Motionless he stood, a grim giant, the light flickering on his wild beard, his mail, and, grasped in the right hand, his short, heavy sword.

Suddenly a girl screamed.

With a wolf-like howl, the apparition battled up the table, scattering food, drink, slashing right and left, leaving a trail of dead and wounded on both benches. A Breton trooper, the only one of the foreign mercenaries left alive, leapt on to the table, a dagger, dripping hot fat and meat juice, in his fist. He struck at the intruder, gashing his arm, but was stabbed in his turn. Groaning, he crashed to the floor.

Saxons came running up with dirks at the ready. There was bloody work about the fire. Alward was hard-pressed by the savage pack.

"To me, you peasants!" he roared. "To me! To me!" His enemies fell back a few paces, and Alward seized the opportunity to snatch up a log of wood and retreat to a corner. He stood, gazing ferociously at the creeping Saxons. His back pressed against the rough wall. The peasants were not coming. He was alone.

He was thrice betrayed in his wife, in his people and in his manor. He wanted only to kill. The hammer beat blindingly. Everything was diffused with red. He began to scream curses until his lips foamed. He flung himself into the midst of the Saxons.

The fight raged all over the hall. He was mailed and strong in his body and in his madness. He hacked and clubbed and never seemed to grow faint from his wounds. But his enemies

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were many and tenacious as savage hounds at a boar. Groups of frightened women scattered, screaming. The hall rang to the clash of weapons and shouts and groans of battle. A lusty fellow beat Alward to his knees and two more dived on him, knifing him. Grimly he struggled, like a dangerous wild animal, blood now flowing freely from a dozen wounds. For a moment his assailants fell back, exhausted. His brain was now cleared of madness and he struggled to his feet. In that instant, everything was still. He cried out, "Saxons—this is an evil day's work. May Satan himself—"

His words were lost as they hurled themselves again on him, bearing him to the ground, stabbing his giant body with senseless fury until his obstinate soul at last had fled.

The hall stank of blood and death. Men groaned from their wounds. Women wept. The place was strewn with bodies. The dogs, stealing from their hiding-places, surreptitiously stole pieces of congealing meat. The terrified peasants at the door heard this calm and crept quietly away.

"Is he dead?" asked Nigel, as they dressed his wound.

"Yes, sire," replied the priest. "He is dead."

"And Githa? How is Githa, Father?"

"In God's hands, sire. The first shaft pinned her to her chair."

Anger and sorrow drained Nigel's failing strength. "Who was he, Father?"

"None knows, sire. He was an Englishman, but his face has been cut to ribbons."

"He fought like a madman."

"He was an instrument of the Evil One, sire. Who but a fiend could do this?"

"I don't understand, Father. Why? Why? Why?"

Nobody could tell him.

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

on page 144

Across. 1, *Escapist.* 5, *Gambol.* 9, *Slimming.* 10, *Paynim.* 12, *Treasurer.* 13, *Award.* 14, *Mary.* 16, *Ducking.* 19, *Lion cub.* 21, *Deed.* 24, *Bambi.* 25, *Lodestone.* 27, *Airmen.* 28, *Reprisal.* 29, *Estate.* 30, *Isotopes.*

Down. 1, *Ersatz.* 2, *Chimes.* 3, *Pumas.* 4, *Synergy.* 6, *Avalanche.* 7, *Benjamin.* 8, *Lame dogs.* 11, *Grid.* 15, *Architect.* 17, *Club-mate.* 18, *Tommy-rot.* 20, *Bull.* 21, *Dodgers.* 22, *Gossip.* 23, *Tellus.* 26, *Sprat.*

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FEAR IS THE KEY

By ALISTAIR MACLEAN

I was on the run, having shot my way out of a Florida court, taking with me heiress Mary Ruthven as hostage. Then Jablonsky—a powerful character—caught up with me, took us to General Ruthven. But Jablonsky was no knight errant; he wanted $50,000 for delivering the girl.

The general agreed, then called in a couple of high-class thugs, Vyland and Royale. They wanted my help, and I was in no position to argue. I was locked up for the night with Jablonsky—whom they'd recognised as a crooked ex-cop—but not for long. Soon I was on my way to the general's oil-rig in the Gulf, where I found the clue to what I was looking for: one of the huge legs supporting the rig was hollow; inside I could hear an air compressor.

I GAVE three sharp tugs on the rope and within a minute was back aboard the *Matapan*. I was hauled aboard as quickly and with as little ceremony as if I had been a sack of coals, and I was still stripping off oxygen cylinder and mask when Captain Zaimis barked for the mooring rope to be slipped, and headed for shore.

It was exactly two o'clock in the morning when he skilfully eased the *Matapan* alongside the wooden jetty from which we'd left. The sky was black now, the night so dark that it was scarcely possible to distinguish land from sea and the rain was a drumfire of sound on the roof of the cabin. But I had to go and go at once. I had to get back inside the house without being observed, I had to have a long conference with Jablonsky, and get my clothes dry.

The general had said that he'd let me know what job it was he had in mind inside thirty-six hours: the thirty-six hours would be up at eight o'clock this morning. I borrowed a long oilskin to keep off the worst of the rain, and left.

At quarter past two, after making a brief stop at a call-box, I parked the Corvette in the side turning where I'd found it and squelched along in the direction of the drive leading up to the general's house.

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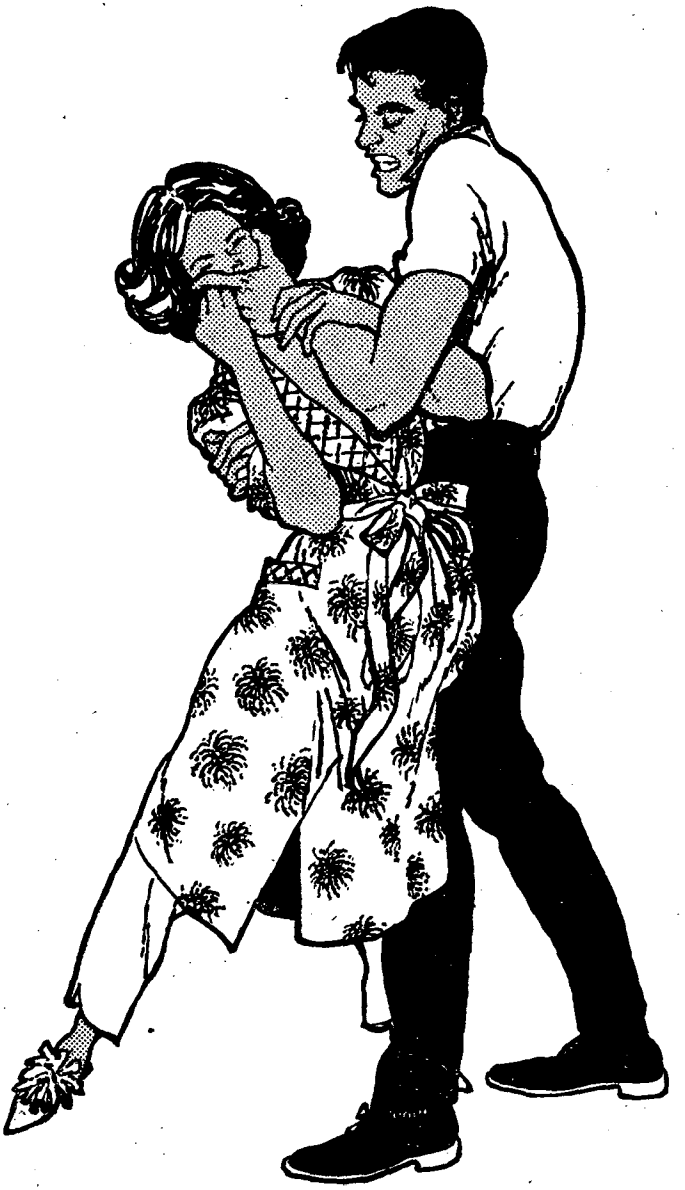

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The rope dangling from the gnarled branch of the big live oak on the other side of the general's wall was where I had left it. Badly hampered by the oilskin I waddled rather than walked up that wall, swung to earth on the other side, clambered up the oak, unfastened the rope, and thrust it under an exposed root. I didn't want any of Vyland's playmates finding it.

What *was* peculiar to the general's estate was the fence about twenty feet beyond the wall. It was a five-stranded affair, and the top three were barbed. What I knew, thanks to Jablonsky, was that pressure on either of the two lower wires operated a warning bell, so I climbed laboriously over the top three wires, to the sound of much ripping and tearing, and lowered myself down the other side.

Under the closely packed trees the darkness was almost absolute. I had a pencil flash but I didn't dare use it, I had to trust to luck and instinct to circle the big kitchen garden that lay to the left of the house and so reach the fire escape at the back. I had about two hundred yards to go and I didn't expect to make it in under a quarter of an hour.

I walked with both arms outstretched before me, and it wasn't until my face collided with a tree trunk that I learnt not to walk with my arms outspread as well as outstretched. I didn't walk, I shuffled. I didn't lift my feet, I slid each one forward slowly and carefully, brushing aside whatever lay in my path, and not allowing any weight to come on the leading foot until I had made good and certain that there was nothing under that foot that would snap or creak when my weight was transferred to it.

Ten minutes after leaving the fence, suddenly, through the trees and the curtain of rain dripping steadily from the oaks, I thought I saw a tiny glimmer of light. A flicker, then gone.

It was thirty feet away, no more, and it wasn't pointing in my direction, it was illuminating something on the ground. I took a couple of quick smooth steps forward, wanting to pinpoint the light source and see the reason for its use, and then I discovered that my navigational sense in the darkness had been completely accurate. The kitchen garden was surrounded by a wire-netted wooden fence and halfway through my second step I walked right into it. The top rail creaked like the door to an abandoned dungeon.

There came a sudden exclamation, the dousing of the light, a brief silence and then the torch flicked on again, the beam no longer pointing at the ground but reaching out for and searching the perimeter of the kitchen garden. Whoever held the torch was as nervous as a kitten.

" Give me that flash." The cold quiet voice was unmistakably Royale's. The torch beam wavered, steadied, then shone down on the ground again. " Get on with it. Now! "

" But I heard something, Mr. Royale! " It was Larry, his voice a high-pitched jittery whisper. " Over there. I know I did."

" Missed out on your shot of the white stuff, tonight? " Royale cruelly interrupted his stooge. " Why did I have to be saddled with a junky like you? Shut up and work."

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Larry shut up. I wondered about what Royale had said, because I'd been wondering about it ever since I saw Larry. His behaviour, the fact that he was allowed to associate with Vyland and the general, the liberties he was permitted, above all his very presence.

Big criminal organisations working for big stakes usually picked the members of their organisation with as much care and forethought as a big corporation picks its top executives. If it was found necessary to remove rivals, the removal was entrusted to quiet polite people like Royale. But Larry was about as much use to them as a match in a powder magazine.

There were three of them in that corner of the kitchen garden, Royale, Larry, and the butler whose range of duties appeared to be wider than that normally expected of his profession.

Larry and the butler were busy with spades. Royale had the light hooded and even at ten yards in that rain it was difficult to see anything, but by and by, judging more by ear than by eye, I knew that they were filling in a hole. I grinned to myself. I would have taken long odds that they were burying something very valuable.

Three minutes later they were finished. Someone drew a rake to and fro across the filled-in hole, and then they all went off together to the garden shed and left their spades.

They passed through a wicket gate not fifteen feet from me—Royale in the lead with the torch in his hand—but by this time I'd withdrawn some yards into the wood and had the thick bole of an oak for cover. They went off together up the path that led to the front of the house. There came the solid click of a heavy door closing on its latch. Then silence.

I stayed exactly where I was, breathing lightly and shallowly, not stirring an inch. The rain trickled down inside the oilskin and overcoat and ran down my back and legs. But I didn't move. I could feel the tide rising up to my ankles, but I didn't move. I just stayed where I was, a human figure carved from ice, but colder. I would have given the earth to move. But I didn't. Only my eyes moved.

After three-quarters of an hour, standing there motionless, my eyes became perfectly accustomed to the dark. I could have spotted a careless movement ten yards away. And I spotted it.

A movement, that is, but not careless. Deliberate. I think it must have been a sudden furious flurry of wind and rain that finally broke the patience of the shadow that now detached itself from the shelter of a nearby tree and moved away silently up towards the house. If I hadn't been watching, staring into the darkness with eyes sore and strained from staring, I would have missed it . . . A shadow moving with the soundlessness of a shadow. A quiet deadly man. Royale.

Royale had heard a noise, all right, and the noise must have been just sufficiently offbeat to make him wonder if someone were there. Only enough to make him wonder. If Royale had been certain he'd have remained there all night waiting to strike. I thought of myself going into that kitchen garden immediately after the three

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had left, getting a spade and starting to investigate, and I felt colder than ever.

But I had to go to get a spade and start investigating sometime, and no better time than now. The rain was torrential, the night as dark as the tomb.

I found a spade in the tool shed, located the freshly-raked earth with a pinpoint of light from my pencil torch, and from the time I had passed through the wicket gate till I had cleared off the two or three inches of earth that covered some kind of white pine packing case, no more than five minutes elapsed.

The packing case was lying at a slight angle in the ground. I flashed the torch cautiously: no name, no marks, nothing to give any indication of the contents.

The case had a wood and rope handle at each end. I grabbed one of those, got both hands round it, and heaved, but the case was over five feet long and seemed to be filled with bricks.

I took my torch again, hooded it till the light it cast was smaller than a penny, and started quartering the surface of the packing case. No metal clasps. No heavy screws. As far as I could see, the only fastenings holding down the lid were a couple of nails at either end. I lifted the spade, dug a corner under one end of the lid. The nails creaked and squealed in protest as I forced them out of the wood, but I went on anyway and sprung the end of the lid clear. I lifted it a couple of feet and shone my flash inside.

Even in death Jablonsky was still smiling. The grin was lopsided and crooked, the way they had had to make Jablonsky himself lopsided and crooked in order to force him inside the narrow confines of that case, but it was still a smile. His face was calm and peaceful, and with the end of a pencil you could have covered that tiny hole between the eyes. It was the kind of hole made by the cupro-nickel jacketed bullet from a .22 automatic.

Twice that night, out on the gulf, I had thought of Jablonsky sleeping peacefully. He'd been asleep all right. He'd been asleep for hours, his skin was cold as marble.

I wiped the rain off the dead face, lowered the lid and hammered the nails softly home with the handle of the spade. I'd opened a hole in the ground and now I closed a grave. It was well for Royale that I did not meet him then.

I returned spade and rake to the tool shed and left the garden.

There were no lights at the back of the chauffeur's lodge. I found one door and two ground-level windows—it was a single-storey building—and they were all locked. But the garage wasn't, and the tool bench was the do-it-yourself devotee's dream.

I ruined a couple of perfectly good wood chisels, but I had the catch slipped on one of the windows in a minute flat. It didn't seem likely that they had burglar alarms fitted to a lodge, especially as there hadn't even been an attempt made to fit half-circle thief-proof latches. But I took no chances, pulled the top window down, and climbed in over it. The lodge window was wired.

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I had picked a room with frosted windows and it seemed a fair bet that that might be the bathroom. And so it was.

Out in the passageway I flicked my pencil light up and down, moved as softly as the squelching of my shoes would permit, picked the door on the left, turned the handle with millimetric caution, and slipped soundlessly inside.

This was it. I closed the door behind me and moved softly in the direction of the deep regular breathing by the left-hand wall. When I was about four feet away I switched on my torch and shone it straight on the sleeper's closed eyes.

He woke as at the touch of a switch and half sat up in bed. He looked a tough, capable, sensible fellow who knew when and when not to try anything, and he knew that now was not the time.

" There's a .32 behind this flash, Kennerley," I said. " Where's your gun? "

" What gun? " He didn't sound scared because he wasn't.

" Get up," I ordered. " Move over to the door."

He moved. I reached under his pillow. " This gun," I said. A small grey automatic. " Back to your bed and sit on it."

Torch transferred to my left hand and the gun in the right, I made a quick sweep of the room. Only one window, with deep velvet wine curtains closed right across. I went to the door, switched on the overhead light, glanced down at the gun, and slipped off the safety-catch. The click was loud, precise, and sounded as if it meant business. Kennerley said, " So you hadn't a gun."

" I've got one now."

" It's not loaded, friend."

" Don't tell me," I said wearily. " You keep it under your pillow just so you can get oil stains all over the sheets? "

I crossed over to the cupboard, opened it, and took out a bottle of whisky and a couple of glasses. I looked at Kennerley. " With your permission, of course."

" Funny man," he said coldly.

I went ahead and poured myself a drink anyway. A big one. I needed it. It tasted just the way it ought to taste and all too seldom does. I watched Kennerley and he watched me.

" Who are you, friend? " he asked.

I'd forgotten that only about two inches of my face was visible. I turned down the collars of my oilskin and overcoat and took off my hat. My hat had become no better than a sponge, my hair was wet and plastered all over my head, but for all that I don't suppose it was any less red than normal. The tightening of Kennerley's mouth, the suddenly still, expressionless eyes told their own story.

" Talbot," he said slowly. " John Talbot. The killer."

" That's me," I agreed. " The killer."

" What do you want, Talbot? What are you doing here? "

" You mean, why am I not high-tailing it for the tall timber? "

" Why have you come back? They've had you locked up in the house, God knows why, since Tuesday evening. You've escaped,

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but you didn't have to mow anyone down to escape or I would have heard of it. They probably don't even know you've been away or I'd have heard of that too. But you've been away. You've been out in a boat, I can smell the sea off you and that's a seaman's oilskin you've got on. You've been out for a long time, you couldn't be any wetter if you'd stood under a waterfall for half an hour. And then you come back. A killer, a wanted man. The whole set-up is screwy as hell."

"Screwy as hell," I agreed. The whisky was good, I was beginning to feel half human for the first time in hours. A smart boy, this chauffeur, a boy who thought on his feet and thought fast. I went on, "Almost as screwy a set-up as the weird bunch you're working for in this place."

He said nothing. I tried again. "The general's daughter, Miss Mary. She's pretty much of a tramp, isn't she?" That got him. He was off the bed, eyes mad, fists balled into hard knots.

"That's better," I said approvingly. "Signs of life at last. I don't think she's a tramp either. I think she's a nice kid."

"Sure you do." His voice was bitter, but I could see the first shadows of puzzlement touching his eyes. "That's why you scared the life out of her that afternoon."

"I'm sorry about that, sincerely sorry. But I had to do it, Kennerley, although not for the reasons that you or any of that murderous bunch up at the big house think." I downed what was left of my whisky, looked at him for a long speculative moment, then tossed the gun across to him. "Suppose we talk?"

It took him by surprise but he was quick, very quick. He fielded the gun neatly, looked at it, looked at me, hesitated, shrugged, then smiled faintly. "I don't suppose another couple of oil stains will do those sheets any harm." He thrust the gun under the pillow, crossed to the table, poured himself a drink, filled up my glass, and stood there waiting.

"I'm not taking the chance you might think I am," I began. "I heard Vyland trying to persuade the general and Mary to get rid of you. From that I gathered you're not on the inside of what's going on. And you're bound to know there's something very strange indeed going on."

He nodded. "I'm only the chauffeur. And what did they say to Vyland?" From the way he spoke the name I gathered he regarded Vyland with something less than affection.

"They stuck in their heels and refused point-blank."

He was pleased at that. He tried not to show it, but he was. "I'm primarily a bodyguard, not a chauffeur. Miss Mary's a tempting bait for every hoodlum in the country who fancies a quick million. But I'm not the bodyguard any longer," he ended abruptly.

"I've met your successor," I nodded. "Valentino. He couldn't guard an empty nursery."

"Valentino?" He grinned. "Al Gunther. But Valentino suits him better. You damaged his arm, so I heard."

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" He damaged my leg. It's black and blue and purple all over." I eyed him speculatively. " Forgotten that you're talking to a murderer, Kennerley? "

" You're no murderer," he said flatly. There was a long pause, then he broke his gaze from me and stared down at the floor.

" Patrolman Donnelly, eh? " I asked. He nodded.

" Donnelly is as fit as you are," I said. " Might take him some little time to wash the powder stains out of his pants, but that's all the damage he suffered."

" Rigged, eh? " he asked softly.

" You've read about me in the papers." I waved a hand at the magazine stand in the corner, I was still front-page news and the photograph was even worse than the previous one. " The rest you'll have heard from Mary. Some of what you've heard and read is true, some of it just couldn't be less true.

" My name *is* John Talbot, and I am, as they said in court, a salvage expert. I have been in all the places they mention, except Bombay, and for approximately the periods they mention. But I have never been engaged in any criminal activities of any kind. However, either Vyland or the general or both are very cagey birds indeed. They've sent cables to contacts in Holland, England, and Venezuela—the general, of course, has oil interests in all three places—to check on my bona fides. They'll be satisfied. We've spent a long time preparing the groundwork for this."

" How do you know they sent those cables? "

" Every overseas cable out of Marble Springs in the past two months has been vetted. The general—all cables are in his name—uses code, of course. Perfectly legal to do so. There's a little old man from Washington living a block away from the post office. He's a genius with codes: he says the general's is childish. From his point of view."

I got up and started to walk about. The effects of the whisky were vanishing, I felt like a cold wet flounder. " I had to get in on the inside. Up till now we've been working very much in the dark, but for reasons which would take too long to explain at present we knew that the general would jump at the chance of getting hold of a salvage expert. He did."

" We? " Kennerley still had his reservations about me.

" Friends of mind. Don't worry, Kennerley, I've got all the law in the world behind me. I'm not in this for myself. To make the general take the bait we had to use the general's daughter. She knows nothing of what actually went on. Judge Mollison's pretty friendly with the family, so I got him to invite Mary along for a meal, suggesting that she drop in at the court-house first while she was waiting for him to clear up the last cases."

" Judge Mollison's in on this? "

" He is. Want to phone him? " He shook his head.

" Mollison knows," I continued, " and about a dozen cops. All sworn to secrecy and they know that a word the wrong way and they're looking for a job. The only person outside the law who

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knows anything about it is the surgeon who is supposed to have operated on Donnelly and then signed his death certificate."

"All a phoney," he murmured. "Here's one that fell for it."

"Everybody did. They were meant to. Phoney reports from Interpol and Cuba—with the full backing of the police concerned—blank rounds in the first two chambers of Donnelly's Colt, phoney road blocks, phoney chases by the cops, phoney—"

"But—but the bullet in the windscreen?"

"I told her to duck. I put it there myself. Car and empty garage all laid on, and Jablonsky laid on too."

"Mary was telling me about Jablonsky," he said slowly. Mary, I noticed, not Miss Mary. Maybe it meant nothing, maybe it showed the way he habitually thought of her. "'A crooked cop,' she said. Just another plant?"

"Just another plant. We've been working on this for over two years. Earlier on we wanted a man who knew the Caribbean backwards. Jablonsky was the man. Born and brought up in Cuba. Two years ago he was a cop, in New York homicide. It was Jablonsky who thought up the idea of rigging false charges against himself. It was smart: it not only accounted for the sudden disappearance of one of the best cops in the country, but it gave him the entrée into the wrong kind of society when the need arose. He's been working with me in the Caribbean for the past eighteen months."

"Taking a chance, wasn't he? I mean, Cuba is home from home for half the crooks in the States, and the chances—"

"He was disguised," I said patiently. "His hair dyed, glasses, even his own mother wouldn't have known him."

There was a long silence, then Kennerley put down his glass and looked steadily at me. "What goes on, Talbot?"

"Sorry. You'll have to trust me. The less anyone knows the better. Mollison doesn't know, none of the lawmen know."

"It's that big?" he asked slowly.

"Big enough. Look, Kennerley, no questions. I'm asking you to help me. If you're not frightened for Mary's health, it's time you started to be. I don't think she knows a thing more about what goes on between Vyland and the general than you do, but I'm convinced she's in danger. Great danger. Of her life. I'm up against big boys playing for big stakes. To win those stakes they've already killed eight times. Eight times to my certain knowledge. If you get mixed up in this business I'd say the chances are that you'll end up with a bullet in your back. I'm asking you to get mixed up in it. I've no right to, but I'm doing it. What's it to be?"

Some of the colour had gone out of his brown face, but not much. He didn't like what I'd just said, but if his hands were trembling I couldn't notice.

"You're a clever man, Talbot," he said slowly. "Maybe too clever, I don't know. But you're clever enough not to have told me all this unless you were pretty certain I'd do it. Playing for big stakes, you said: I think I'd like to sit in."

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I didn't waste any time in thanking him. Instead I said, "I want you to go with Mary. I'm almost certain that tomorrow morning—this coming morning, that is—we'll all be going out to the oil-rig. Mary will have no option. You will go with her. Make some excuse to go up to the house early. See Mary. Tell her that Valentino is going to have a slight accident in the course of the morning and she—"

"What do you mean, he'll have an accident?"

"Don't worry," I said grimly. "He'll have his accident all right. He won't be able to look after himself, far less anybody else, for some time to come. Tell her that she is to insist on having you back. If she sticks out her neck and makes an issue of it she'll win. The general won't object, and I'm pretty sure Vyland won't either." I paused. "Anyway, Vyland will just think she's insisting on having you because he thinks she has, shall we say, a soft spot for you."

He kept his face expressionless. "I'll tell her and I'll play it the way you want." He thought a moment, then continued, "At the same time, I think that the fact that I'm doing it at all entitles me to a little more honesty on your part."

"Have I been dishonest?" I wasn't annoyed, I was just beginning to feel very tired.

"Only in what you don't say. Compared to what you're after, Talbot, Mary's safety doesn't matter a tuppenny damn to you. If it did you could have hidden her away when you had her the day before yesterday. But you didn't. It was *you*, Talbot, who brought her back to this danger. O.K., so you want me to keep an eye on her. But you want me for something else, too."

I nodded. "I do. I'm going into this with my hands tied. Literally. I'm going into this as a prisoner. I must have someone I can trust. I'm trusting you."

"You can trust Jablonsky," he said quietly.

"Jablonsky's dead." He stared at me without speaking. After a few moments he reached out for the bottle and splashed whisky into both our glasses. His mouth was a thin white line.

"See that?" I pointed to my sodden shoes. "That's the earth from Jablonsky's grave." I gave him a brief account of what had happened since I'd left the house.

When I was finished he said, "Royale?"

"Royale."

"You'll never be able to prove it."

"I won't have to." I said it almost without realising what I was saying. "Royale may never stand trial. Jablonsky was my best friend."

He knew what I was saying, all right. He said softly, "I'd just as soon you never came after me, Talbot."

I drained my whisky. It was having no effect now. I felt old and tired and empty and dead. Then Kennerley spoke again. "What are you going to do now?"

"Do? I'm going to borrow some dry shoes and socks and

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underwear from you. Then I'm going to go back up to the house, go to my room, dry my clothes off, handcuff myself to the bed, and throw the keys away. They'll come for me in the morning."

"You're crazy," he whispered. "Why do you think they killed Jablonsky? They killed him because they found out the double-cross. And if they found out about him, they must have found out about you. They'll be waiting for you up there in your room."

He put his hand on my arm. "How much are they paying you for this, Talbot?"

"Pennies."

"Reward?"

"None."

"Then what in the name of God is the compulsion that will drive a man like you to crazy lengths like those?"

I said, "I'll tell you some day."

"You'll never live to tell anybody anything," he said sombrely.

I picked up my dry clothing, said good night, and left . . .

There was nobody waiting for me in my room up in the general's house. I unlocked the corridor door with the duplicate key Jablonsky had given me, eased it open with only a whisper of sound, and passed inside. The room was empty.

I went over every square foot of floor and walls with my pencil flash. Nothing missing, nothing changed.

I took keys from the pocket of my already steaming jacket and crossed to the communicating door to Jablonsky's room. Maybe the reception committee was waiting there. I didn't much care.

The room was as empty as my own. I crossed to the corridor door and tried the handle. The door was locked.

The bed, as I expected, had been slept in.

The pillow was a mess, but nothing to what it would have been if death hadn't been instantaneous. The bullet must have passed clean through the skull; not what you would have expected from a .22, but then Mr. Royale used very fancy ammunition. I found the shell in the down of that pillow. Cupro-nickel. It wasn't like Royale to be so careless. I was going to look after that little piece of metal. I was going to treasure it like the Cullinan diamond.

I found some adhesive in a drawer, pulled off a sock, and taped the spent bullet under the second and third toes where it wouldn't interfere with my walking. It would be safe there.

Down on my hands and knees I levelled the torch along the nap of the carpet and squinted down the beam. It wasn't much of a carpet but it was enough, the two parallel indentations where Jablonsky's heels had dragged across it were unmistakable.

I crossed to the small table in the corner, poured three fingers of whisky into a glass, and sat down to try to figure it all out.

The set-up just didn't begin to make any sense at all. Nothing jibed, nothing fitted. How had Royale and whoever had been with him—for no one man could have carried Jablonsky out of that room by himself—managed to get in in the first place?

Jablonsky had been shot when sleeping in bed. Jablonsky, I

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knew, had pyjamas and used them—but when I found him in the kitchen garden he'd been completely clothed. Why dress him? It didn't make sense.

I went back into my own room, rearranged my steaming clothes on the back of the chair before the electric fire, then returned to Jablonsky's room. I took up my glass again and glanced at the whisky bottle. It was a five-gill flask, still three parts full. That was no help, what was missing wouldn't even have begun to affect Jablonsky's razor-edged vigilance. I'd seen Jablonsky dispose of an entire bottle of rum in an evening—he wasn't a whisky man.

Sitting there alone in the near darkness, the only illumination the glow from the electric fire in the next room, I lifted my glass. A toast, a farewell, I don't know what you'd call it. It was for Jablonsky. I sipped it slowly, rolling the whisky over my tongue to savour to the full the rich bouquet and taste of a fine old Scotch; for the space of two or three seconds I sat very still indeed, then I put the glass down, rose, crossed quickly to the corner of the room, spat the Scotch into the washbasin, and rinsed my mouth out.

It was Vyland who had provided the whisky. After Jablonsky had paraded me downstairs last night, Vyland had given him a sealed whisky bottle and glasses to take back to his room. Jablonsky had poured out a couple of drinks soon after we had gone upstairs and I'd actually had my glass in my hand when I remembered that drinking alcohol before breathing oxygen on a deep dive wasn't a very clever thing to do. Jablonsky had drained them both, then had maybe a couple more after I had left.

Royale and his friends didn't have to batter Jablonsky's door in with fireaxes, they had a key for the job, but even if they had used axes Jablonsky would never have heard them. There had been enough knockout drops in that bottle of whisky to put an elephant out for the count. He must have been just able to stagger as far as his bed before collapsing. I knew it was stupid, but I stood there in the silent dark reproaching myself bitterly for not having accepted that drink; it was a fairly subtle blending of a Mickey Finn and Scotch, but I think I would have got on to it straight away. Jablonsky wasn't a whisky man, maybe he thought that was the way Scotch ought to taste.

And Royale, of course, had found two glasses with whisky dregs in them. That made me as unconscious as Jablonsky. But it hadn't been any part of their plan to kill me too.

I understood it all now, everything except the answer to the one question that really mattered: why had they killed Jablonsky? I couldn't even begin to guess. And had they bothered looking in to check on me? I didn't think so. But I wouldn't have bet a pair of old bootlaces on it.

There was nothing to be gained by sitting and thinking about it, so I sat and thought about it for a couple of hours. By that time my clothes were dry, or as near dry as made no difference. I dressed, all except for coat and tie, opened the window, and was just on the point of throwing out the three duplicate keys for the room doors

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and the handcuff key to join the other stuff in the shrubbery below when I heard a soft tapping on the door of Jablonsky's room.

I only jumped about a foot, then I froze. I just stood there. Lot's wife had nothing on me. For a lifetime of ten seconds not a single intelligent thought came, just an impulse, one single overpowering impulse. To run. But I had no place to run to.

It was Royale, that quiet cold deadly man with the little gun. It was Royale; he was waiting outside that door and the little gun would be in his hand. He knew I was out, all right. He'd checked. Then why had he waited so long?

I cat-footed through to Jablonsky's room, closed my hand round the neck of the whisky bottle, went as silently back into my own room, and slid a key into the lock of the door opening on to the passage outside. The bolt slid back without even the whisper of a click and just at that moment the knocking came again, slightly louder this time and more sustained. Under cover of the sound I slid the door open a crack, raised the bottle over my head ready for throwing, and stuck my head round the corner of the door.

The passage was only dimly lit by a single weak night-light at the other end of a long corridor, but it was enough. Enough to let me see that the figure in the passage had no gun in its hand. Enough to let me see that it wasn't Royale. It was Mary Ruthven.

I lowered the whisky bottle and stepped back softly into my room. Five seconds later I was at the door of Jablonsky's room. I said in my best imitation of Jablonsky's deep husky voice, "Who's there?"

"Mary Ruthven. Let me in. Quickly. Please!"

I let her in. Quickly. I had no more desire than she had that she should be seen out in that passage. I kept behind the door as she came through, then closed it swiftly before the pale glimmer of light from outside gave her time to identify me.

"Mr. Jablonsky." Her voice was a quick urgent breathless frightened whisper. "I had to come to see you. I thought I could never get away but Gunther dropped off to sleep and he may—"

"Easy, easy," I said. I'd lowered my voice to a whisper, it was easier to imitate Jablonsky that way. "Why come to see me?"

"Because there was no one else I could turn to. You're not a killer, you're not even a crook, I don't care what they say you've done, you're not bad." She was a sharp one, all right, her woman's insight or intuition or whatever had taken her far beyond what either Vyland or the general could see. "You must help me—us—you simply must. We—we are in great trouble."

"We?"

"Daddy and I." A pause. "I honestly don't know about my father, I honestly don't. Perhaps he's not in trouble. Maybe he's working with those—those evil men because he wants to. He comes and goes as he pleases. But—but it's so unlike him. Maybe he has to work with them. Oh, I don't know, I don't know." I caught the glint of fair hair as she shook her head.

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"Easy," I interrupted again. I couldn't keep this deception up much longer. "Facts, miss, if you please." It was only a matter of time till she could see enough of my features to see that I wasn't Jablonsky—and that red thatch of mine was a dead giveaway.

"How can I begin?" she said. "We seem to have lost all our freedom, or Daddy has. Not in moving around, *he's* not a prisoner, but we never make decisions for ourselves. Even when I go to a friend's house, like Judge Mollison's, that horrible man Gunther is with me all the time. Daddy says he's had kidnap threats about me recently. I don't believe it and if it were true Simon Kennerley —the chauffeur—is far better than Gunther. I never have a private moment to myself. When I'm out on the rig—the X 13—I'm no prisoner, I just can't get off, but here my room windows are screwed into the wall and Gunther spends the night in the ante-room watching to see—"

The last three words took a long, long time to come out and trailed off into a shocked silence. In her excitement, her eagerness to unburden herself of all those things that had been worrying her for weeks, she had come close to me. And now her eyes were adjusted to the darkness. She started to shake. Her right hand began to move up slowly towards her mouth, the arm trembling all the time and jerking like the arm of a marionette, her mouth opened and her eyes widened and kept on widening until I could see white all the way round the pupils. And then she drew a long quavering breath. Prelude to a scream.

But the prelude was all that there was to it. In my business, you don't telegraph your signals. I'd one hand over her mouth and an arm round her before she'd even made up her mind what key to sing in. For several seconds, with surprising strength—or in the circumstances perhaps not so surprising—she struggled furiously, then sagged against me, limp as a shot rabbit. She wasn't faking, she was out cold. I couldn't bear to have her lie on that bed where Jablonsky had so recently been murdered so I carried her through to the bed in my own room.

Her face, just then, was as pale as old ivory.' Nothing would ever make it a beautiful face, but then I suppose that if it had been beautiful my heart wouldn't have chosen that moment to start doing handsprings, the first time it had shown any life at all, far less such extravagant activity, in three long and empty years.

Her face seemed to fade and again I could see the fire and the slippers that I'd seen two nights ago and all that stood between us were two hundred and eighty-five million dollars and the fact that I was the only man in the world the very sight of whom could make her collapse in terror. I put my dreams away.

She stirred and opened her eyes. I felt that the technique I'd used with Kennerley—telling him that there was a gun behind my torch—might have unfortunate results in this case. So I caught one of the hands that were lying limply on the coverlet, bent forward, and said softly, reprovingly, "You silly young muggins, why did you go and do a daft thing like that?"

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Luck or instinct or both had put me on the right track. Her eyes were wide, but not staring wide, and the fear that still showed there was touched with puzzlement. Murderers of a certain category don't hold your hand and speak reassuringly.

Her voice was husky. " I—I'm sorry, I was so stupid—"

" Right," I said briskly. " If you're feeling fit for it, we'll talk. We have to, and there's little time."

" Can't you put the light on? " she begged.

" No light. Shines through curtains. We don't want any—"

" There are shutters," she interrupted. " Wooden shutters. On every window."

Hawk-eye Talbot, that was me. I'd spent a whole day doing nothing but stare out of the window and I'd never even seen them. I rose, closed and fastened the shutters, closed the communicating door to Jablonsky's room, and switched on the light.

" I'm hurt," I announced. " You can take one look at Jablonsky and tell right away, or so you think, that he's not a crook. But the longer you look at me the more convinced you are that I'm a murderer." I held up a hand as she was about to speak. " Sure, you got reasons. Excellent reasons. But they're wrong." I hitched up a trouser leg and offered for her inspection a foot elegantly covered in a maroon sock and completely plain black shoe.

She looked at them, just for a second, then switched her gaze to my face. " Simon's," she whispered. " Those are Simon's."

" Your chauffeur." I didn't care much for this Simon business. " He gave them to me a couple of hours ago. Of his own free will. It took me five minutes flat to convince him that I am *not* a murderer and far from what I appear to be. Are you willing to give me the same time? " She nodded slowly without speaking.

It didn't even take three minutes. The fact that Kennerley had given me the O.K. was the battle more than half won as far as she was concerned. But I skipped the bit about finding Jablonsky. She wasn't ready for any more shocks of that nature, not yet.

When I was finished she said, almost unbelievingly, " So you knew all the time? About Daddy and me and our troubles—"

" We've known about you for several months. Not specifically about your trouble, though, nor your father's, whatever that may be: all we knew was that General Blair Ruthven was mixed up in something that General Blair Ruthven had no right to be mixed up in. What's your father scared of, Mary? "

" I—I don't know. I know he's frightened of Royale, but—"

" He's frightened of Royale. I'm frightened of Royale. We're all frightened of Royale. I'll take long odds that Vyland feeds him plenty of stories about Royale to keep him good and scared. But it's not that. Not primarily. He's frightened for your sake, too, but my guess is that those fears have only grown since he found out the kind of company he's keeping. What they're really like, I mean. Just how long have Vyland and your father been, shall we say, business associates? "

She thought a bit and she said, " It started when we were on our

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yacht, *Temptress*, in the West Indies late last April. We'd been in Kingston, Jamaica, when Daddy got word from Mummy's lawyers that she wanted a legal separation. You may have heard about it," she went on miserably. " I don't think there was a paper in North America that missed out on the story."

" You mean the general had been so long held up as the model citizen and their marriage as the ideal marriage? "

" Yes, something like that. They made a lovely target for the sensational press," she said bitterly. " I don't know what came over Mummy, we had all always got on so well together, but it just shows that children never know exactly how things were or are between their parents."

" Children? "

" Yes." She sounded tired and dispirited and beaten, and she looked that way. And she was, or she would never have talked to a stranger of such things. " There's another girl. Jean, my young sister—she's ten years younger than I am. Daddy married late in life. Jean's with my mother. It looks as if she's going to stay with my mother, too. The lawyers are still working things out. There'll be no divorce, of course." She smiled emptily. " You don't know the New England Ruthvens, Mr. Talbot, but if you did you'd know that there are certain words missing from their vocabulary. ' Divorce ' is one of them."

" Your father has never made any attempts at reconciliation? "

" He went up to see her twice. It was no good. She doesn't—she doesn't even want to see me. She's gone away somewhere and apart from Daddy nobody quite knows where."

" It was at this moment that Vyland stepped in? "

" About then. A week or two later. Daddy was pretty low, I suppose he was willing to listen to any proposal that would take his mind off his troubles, and—and—"

" And, of course, his business judgment was below par. Although it wouldn't have to be more than a fraction below to allow friend Vyland to get his foot stuck in the front door. From the cut of his moustache and the way he arranges his display handkerchief Vyland is everything a topflight industrialist ought to be. I don't suppose Royale appeared on the scene until later? "

She nodded dumbly. She looked to me to be pretty close to tears. Tears can touch me, but not when I'm pushed for time. And I was desperately short of time now. I switched off the light, went to the window, pulled back one of the shutters and stared out. The darkness in the east was lightening into grey, the dawn was in the sky. I closed the shutter, switched on the light, and looked down at the weary girl. " Think they'll be able to fly the helicopter out to the X13 today? "

" Choppers can fly in practically any weather." She stirred. " Who says anybody's flying out there today? "

" I do." I didn't elaborate. " Now, perhaps, you'll tell me the truth of why you came here to see Jablonsky? "

" I'm not holding anything back, honestly I'm not. It's just

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that I'm so—so worried. I overheard something about him . . . You know the library's wired, I mean they've got listening devices plugged in—well, I was next door in the office where the earphones are and I don't know why I just put them on." I grinned: the idea of the biter bit appealed. "Vyland and Royale were in the library. They were talking about Jablonsky."

I wasn't grinning any more.

"They had him tailed this morning when he went into Marble Springs. It seems he went into a hardware store, why, they don't know." I could have filled that part in: he'd gone to buy a rope, have duplicate keys cut, and do quite a bit of telephoning. "It seems he was there half an hour without coming out, then the tail went in after him. Jablonsky came out, but his shadower didn't. He'd disappeared." She smiled faintly. "It seems that Jablonsky must have attended to him."

I didn't smile. I said quietly, "How do they know this?"

"They had three tails on Jablonsky. He didn't catch on to the other two."

I nodded wearily. "And then?"

"Jablonsky went to the post office. I saw him going in myself when we—Daddy and I—were on our way to tell the police the story Daddy insisted I tell, about how you'd dumped me and I'd thumbed a lift home. Well, it seems Jablonsky picked up a pad of telegraph forms, went into the booth, wrote out and sent off a message. One of Vyland's men waited till he'd left, then got the pad and took off the top message sheet—the one under the sheet Jablonsky had written on—and brought it back here. From what I could hear Vyland seemed to be working on this with some powder and lamps."

So even Jablonsky could slip up. But in his place I would have done the same. Exactly the same. I would have assumed that if I'd disposed of a shadower that would be the lot. "Any more?"

"A little, not much. I gather they made out most of what was written on the form, but they couldn't understand it, I think it must have been in code." She broke off, "But the address was in plain language, of course."

"Of course." I knew the answer to my next question, but I had to ask her. "And the address?"

"A Mr. J. C. Curtin, Federal Bureau of Investigation. That—that was really why I came. I knew I had to warn Mr. Jablonsky. I think he's in great danger, Mr. Talbot."

For the past fifteen minutes I'd been looking for a way to break the news to her, but now I gave up. "You're too late." I hadn't meant my voice to sound harsh and cold, but that's the way it sounded. "Jablonsky's dead. Murdered."

They came for me at eight o'clock next morning, Royale and Valentino.

I was fully dressed except for my coat and I was fastened to the bedhead by a single set of handcuffs—I'd thrown the key away

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together with Jablonsky's three duplicate keys after I'd locked all the doors.

There was no reason why they should search me and I hoped as I never hoped before that they wouldn't. After Mary had left, tear-stained, forlorn, and having unwillingly promised me that no word of what had passed should be repeated to anyone, not even her father, I'd sat down and thought.

Then I'd got a sheet of thin paper and written a long message on one side, folded it twice until it was only a couple of inches wide, sealed it with tape and addressed it to Judge Mollison at his home address. Then I'd folded it in half lengthwise, slid it over the neck-band of my tie and turned my collar down over it until it was completely hidden. I had less than an hour in bed.

But I pretended to be sound asleep when they came in. Somebody shook me roughly by the shoulder. I ignored it. He shook me again. I stirred. He gave up the shaking as unprofitable and used the back of his hand across my face, not lightly. Enough was enough. I groaned, and blinked my eyes painfully.

"On your feet, Talbot." Royale looked calm and smooth as ever, and fully rested: another dead man on his conscience wasn't going to rob him of much sleep.

"Eh?" I shook my head from side to side and made a great play of being dazed and half doped. "What in hell's name did I have for dinner last night?"

"Dinner?" Royale smiled his pale quiet smile. "You and Jablonsky emptied that bottle between you. That's what you had for dinner."

I nodded slowly. He was on safe ground as far as he knew his ground; if I'd been doped I'd have only the haziest recollection of what had happened immediately before I'd passed out.

"Why only one handcuff?" Royale asked.

"What does it matter if it's one cuff or twenty," I said irritably. "I can't remember. I seem to think Jablonsky shoved me in here in a great hurry and could only find one. I think perhaps he didn't feel too good either." I buried my face in my hands and drew them down hard as if to clear my head and eyes. Between my fingers I glimpsed Royale's slow nod of understanding and I knew I had it made: it was exactly what Jablonsky would have done—rushed in to secure me before he collapsed.

The cuff was unlocked and on the way through Jablonsky's room I glanced casually at the table. The whisky bottle was still there. Empty. Royale—or Vyland—didn't miss much.

We went out into the passage with Royale leading and Valentino bringing up the rear. I shortened my step abruptly and Valentino dug his gun into the small of my back.

"Keep your trained ape out of my hair, Royale," I said tightly, "or I'll take him apart. Guns or no guns."

"Lay off him, Gunther," Royale said quietly.

"Jeez, boss, I didn't hardly touch him."

"Sure, I know. Just lay off him."

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Royale reached the head of the stairs first and was half a dozen steps down by the time I got there. Again I slowed abruptly, again Valentino bumped into me. I swung round, chopped the side of my hand against his gun wrist, and knocked the automatic to the ground. Valentino dived to pick it up with his left hand then roared in anguish as the heel of my right shoe stamped down and crushed his fingers between leather and metal. With both his hands out of commission, Mary Ruthven needed a new bodyguard.

They were waiting for us in the library, the general, Vyland, and Larry the junky. The general's expression, as usual, was hidden behind moustache and beard but there was a tinge of blood to his eyes and he seemed greyer than thirty-six hours ago; maybe it was just my imagination, everything looked bad to me that morning. Vyland was urbane and polished and smiling and tough as ever, freshly shaven, eyes clear, dressed in a beautifully cut charcoal-grey suit, white soft shirt and red tie. He was a dream. Larry was just Larry, white-faced, with the junky's staring eyes, pacing up and down behind the desk. But he didn't look quite so jerky as usual; so I concluded that he'd had a good breakfast, chiefly of heroin.

"Morning, Talbot." It was Vyland speaking; the big-time crooks today find it just as easy to be civil to you as to snarl and beat you over the head, and it pays off better.

There was no longer even an attempt at keeping up the pretence that the general was the boss; he just stood quietly in the background, remote and dignified and in some way tragic. But maybe the tragedy was only in my own mind; I could be terribly wrong about the general. Fatally wrong.

"Where's Jablonsky?" I demanded.

"Jablonsky?" Vyland raised a lazy eyebrow. "You appear very anxious to know, Talbot." He looked at me long and consideringly, and I didn't like it at all. "I've seen you before, Talbot. So has the general. I wish I could remember who it is you remind me of." He snapped his fingers. "Larry, the cables."

Larry picked up some papers from the desk, handed them to Vyland, grinned at me wolfishly and resumed his pacing.

"The general and I are very careful people, Talbot," Vyland went on. "Some people might say highly suspicious. Same thing. We checked up on you. We checked in England, Holland, and Venezuela." He waved the papers. "These came in this morning. They say you're all you claim to be, one of Europe's top salvage experts. So now we can go ahead and use you. So now we don't need Jablonsky any more. So we let him go this morning. With his cheque. He said he fancied a trip to Europe."

Vyland was quiet, convincing, utterly sincere, and could have talked his way past St. Peter. I looked as I thought St. Peter might have looked as he was in the process of being convinced, then I said a lot of things St. Peter would never have said and finished up by snarling, "The dirty lying doublecrosser! To think that I listened to that lying two-timer. He promised me—"

"Well, what did he promise you?" Vyland asked softly.

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"No harm now," I scowled. "Jablonsky reckoned I was for the high jump here—and he reckoned that the charges by the New York police had been rigged. He thinks—or said he thought—he could prove it, if he was given the chance to investigate certain policemen and certain police files." I swore. "And to think I—"

"You're wandering, Talbot," Vyland interrupted sharply. He was watching me very closely indeed. "Go on."

"He thought he could buy this chance—and at the same time have me help him while he helped me. He spent a couple of hours in our room trying to remember an old federal code and then he wrote a telegram to some agency offering some very interesting information about General Ruthven in exchange for a chance to examine certain files. And I was mug enough to think he meant it!"

"You don't by any chance happen to remember the name of the man to whom this telegram was addressed?"

"No. I forget."

"You better remember, Talbot. You may be buying yourself something very important to you—your life."

I looked at him without expression, then stared at the floor. Finally I said without looking up, "Catin, Cartin, Curtin—yes, that was it. Curtin. J. C. Curtin."

"And all he offered was to give information if his own conditions were met. Talbot, you've just bought yourself your life."

Sure, I'd bought myself my life. I noticed Vyland didn't specify how long I would be allowed to hang on to my purchase. Twenty-four hours, if that. It all depended how the job went. But they'd fallen for my story.

I saw Vyland and Royale exchange glances, a mere flicker, and the faint shrug of Vyland's shoulders. They were tough all right, those two, tough and cool and ruthless and calculating and dangerous. I wondered how they would have reacted, had they known that federal agents could have been on to them all of three months ago. But the time had not then been ripe. Nor was it yet.

"Well, gentlemen, is there any need for further delay?" It was the first time the general had spoken, and for all his calmness there was a harsh burred edge of strain beneath. "The weather is deteriorating rapidly. We should leave as soon as possible."

He was right about the weather, except in the tense he used. It had deteriorated. Whether the centre of the storm was going to hit or pass by us I didn't know: but we'd have it in less than twelve hours.

"We're just leaving, General. Everything's set. Petersen is waiting for us down in the bay." Petersen, I guessed, would be the helicopter pilot. "A couple of fast trips and we should all be out there in an hour or so. Then Talbot here can get to work."

"All?" asked the general. "Who?"

"Yourself, myself, Royale, Talbot, Larry, and your daughter."

"Mary. Is it necessary?"

Vyland said nothing, he just looked steadily at the general. Five seconds, perhaps more, then the general's hands unclenched

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and his shoulders drooped a fraction. Picture without words.

There came the quick light tap of feminine footsteps from the passage inside and Mary Ruthven walked in through the open door. She was dressed in a lime-coloured two-piece costume with an open-necked green blouse beneath. She had shadows under her eyes, she looked pale and tired and I thought she was wonderful.

Kennerley was behind her, but he remained respectfully out in the passage, hat in hand, his face set in the remote unseeing, unhearing expression of the perfectly-trained family chauffeur. I started to move aimlessly towards the door, waiting for Mary to do what I'd told her less than two hours previously.

" I'm going into Marble Springs with Kennerley, Father," Mary began. It was a statement of fact, but was in effect a request for permission.

" But—well, we're going to the rig, my dear," her father said unhappily. " You said last night—"

" I'm coming," she said with a touch of impatience. " But we can't all go at once. I'll come on the second trip. We won't be long. Do you mind, Mr. Vyland? " she asked sweetly.

" I'm afraid it's rather difficult, Miss Ruthven," Vyland said urbanely. " You see, Gunther has hurt himself—and you know how your father likes you to have protection when—"

" Kennerley used to be all the protection I ever needed," she said coldly. " He still is. What is more, I'm not going out to the rig with you and Royale and that—that creature there "—she left no doubt but that she meant Larry—" unless Kennerley comes with me. And that's final. And I must go into Marble Springs. Now."

I wondered when anyone had last talked to Vyland like that. But the veneer never even cracked.

" Why must you, Miss Ruthven? "

" There are some questions a gentleman never asks," she said icily.

Every eye in the room was on the two of them, except mine: mine were on Kennerley's and his were on mine. I was near the door now, with my back turned to the company. It had been easy to slip out the piece of paper from under my collar and now I held it against my chest so that he could see Judge Mollison's name on it. His expression didn't alter and it would have taken a micrometer to measure his nod. But he was with me.

It was Royale who broke the tension in the room. " I'd like some fresh air, Mr. Vyland. I could go along with them. "

I went out through that doorway the way a torpedo leaves its tube. Kennerley had his arm outstretched and I caught it: we crashed heavily to the floor and went rolling along the passageway together. Inside the first two seconds I had the letter stuck deep inside his tunic and we were still threshing about and belabouring each other on the shoulders and back and everywhere it didn't hurt very much when we heard the flat click of a safety-catch.

" Break it up, you two."

We broke it up and I got to my feet under the steady menace of

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Royale's gun. Larry, too, was hopping around in the background, waving a revolver; had I been Vyland I wouldn't even have let him have a catapult.

"That was a good job of work, Kennerley," Vyland was saying.

"Thank you, sir," Kennerley said woodenly. "I don't like killers."

"Neither do I, my boy, neither do I," Vyland said approvingly. "Very well, Miss Ruthven. Mr. Royale will go along."

She swept by without a word to him or a glance at me. Her head was high. I still thought she was wonderful.

We touched down on the landing deck of the X 13 shortly after ten o'clock in the morning.

It took six men to hold the helicopter even reasonably steady while the general, Vyland, Larry, and I shinned down the extension ladder. Petersen gunned his motor and took off just as the last of us reached the deck and was lost in a blinding flurry of rain inside ten seconds. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

We staggered along against the wind till we came to a raised hatch-cover entrance which gave on to a companionway leading to the deck below. A group of men awaited us here, and I had my collar turned up, hat-brim turned down, and a handkerchief in my hand busy wiping the rain off my face, but I needn't have bothered: Joe Curran, the roustabout foreman I'd talked to ten hours previously, was not there.

Two men came forward to meet us. General Ruthven did the honours: "Martin Jerrold, our field foreman; Tom Harrison, our petroleum engineer. Gentlemen, this is John Smith, a specialist engineer flown out from England to help Mr. Vyland in his research." John Smith, I gathered, was the inspired choice of name for myself.

Both men made perfunctory noises of greeting. Larry prodded me in the back so I said I was delighted too, but they obviously had no interest at all in me. Both men looked worried and uneasy, and both men were doing their best to conceal the fact. But the general didn't miss it. "Something bothering you, Harrison?"

"Very much so, sir." Harrison produced a small chart, spread it out, and pointed with a carpenter's pencil. "This chart's good, General Ruthven. It couldn't be better, and Pride and Honeywell are the best geological team in the business. But we're already twelve hundred feet overdue. We should have hit oil at least five hundred feet back. I can't even begin to explain it, sir."

I could have explained it, but it was hardly the time.

"Those things happen, my boy," the general said easily—the control, the self-possession were admirable. "Give it another thousand. The responsibility's mine."

The general looked at Jerrold. "Something on your mind, too?"

"The weather, sir."

"Of course." The general nodded understandingly. "Latest reports are that Hurricane Diane is going to hit Marble Springs

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fair and square. And that means the X 13. You must suspend drilling the moment you think it's right to."

"It's not that, sir," Jerrold said unhappily. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "That experimental leg you're working on, sir—shouldn't it be lowered to give maximum stability?"

So the drilling crew did know there was something going on in that pillar I'd investigated the previous night.

"Vyland?" The general turned and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I'll accept full responsibility, General Ruthven." He spoke in the quiet, precise, confident tone. "We are now so near the perfection of this technique which is going to revolutionise underwater drilling that it would be a crime to set it back, maybe several months, by lowering the leg and perhaps destroying all our delicate equipment."

So that was the line. It was well done, I had to admit.

We left them and made our way down a broad passage. Deep inside the platform here the sound of the wind and the rising waves crashing and breaking against the pillars was completely inaudible. Perhaps some faint murmur of sound might have been heard if the air in that brightly-lit steel passage hadn't been filled with the hum of powerful generators: we appeared to be passing by some Diesel engine-room.

At the far end of the passage we turned left and walked almost to its far cul-de-sac limits before stopping outside a door on the right-hand side. On this door, printed in large white letters, was the legend: DRILLING RESEARCH PROJECT followed, by the words:

PRIVATE.

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Vyland rapped on the door in a long code knock—I made a mental note of it: four shorts, two long, four shorts—waited till there came three long knocks from the inside, then knocked again, four times in rapid succession. Ten seconds later we had all passed through the door and it was double locked and bolted behind us. It made *Private* and *No Admittance* seem rather superfluous.

Steel floor, steel bulkheads, steel ceiling, it was a bleak cheerless box of a room. At least, three sides of it formed a box—the bulkhead we'd just passed through, the blank bulkhead on the left, and the one on the right, with a high grilled door in its centre. The fourth side was convex, bulging out into the room in an almost perfect semicircle, with a butterfly-clamped hatchway in its middle: the trunking, I felt certain, of the big steel pillar reaching down to the floor of the sea. On either side of the hatchway hung large drums with neatly coiled rubber tubes armoured in flexible steel. Below each drum, and bolted to the floor, was a large motor; the one on the right side was, I knew, an air compressor—that's what I'd heard when I'd been out there during the night—and the one on the left probably a forced-suction water pump. As for the furnishings of the room, even the Spartans would have found it rugged: a deal table, two benches, and a metal wall-rack.

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There were two men in the room—the one who had opened the door and another sitting at the table, dead cigar in his mouth and a pack of greasy cards spread out on the table in front of him—and both cast in the same mould. It wasn't the fact that they were both shirtsleeved and had leather holsters strapped across their chests and high up on their left sides that gave them the close similarity, not even their evenly-matched height and weight and broad bulky shoulders. The sameness lay in their faces, hard expressionless faces with cold, still, watchful eyes. I'd seen men out of the same mould before, the top-notch professional of the strong-arm underworld.

Vyland walked across to the wall-rack, reached down a long roll of canvas-backed paper that was wrapped round a wooden stick, unrolled it flat on the table and weighted the ends to keep them from curling up again. It was a large and highly complicated diagram, sixty inches long by about thirty in depth.

"Ever seen that before, Talbot?"

I bent over the table. The diagram represented a peculiar object shaped between a cylinder and a cigar, about four times as long as its average width. It was flat on top, flat along the middle third of the bottom, then tapering slightly upwards towards either end. At least eighty per cent of it appeared to be given up to some kind of storage tanks—I could see the fuel lines leading to the tanks from a raised bridge-like structure superimposed on the top side. This same bridge housed the beginnings of a vertical cylindrical chamber which ran clear through the body of the machine, passed out through the bottom, angled sharply left, and entered an oval-shaped chamber suspended beneath the body of the cigar. On either side of this oval chamber and attached to the underside of the cigar were large rectangular containers. To the left, towards the narrower and more tapering end, were searchlights and long slender remote-control grabs housed in spring clips along the side.

I took a good long look at all of this, then straightened. "Sorry." I shook my head. "Never seen it in my life."

I needn't have bothered straightening for the next moment I was lying on the deck: five seconds later I pushed myself to my knees, shaking my head in an attempt to clear it. I made out Vyland standing above me, his pistol held by the barrel.

"Remember anything now?"

"It's a development of the early French bathyscaphes," I said rapidly. "This model is a combined British and French naval project, designed to reach only about twenty per cent of the depth of its predecessors—it's good for about two thousand five hundred feet—but it's faster, more manœuvrable and equipped for underwater salvage which its predecessors weren't.

"When this bathyscaphe was brought out in a freighter to do its preliminary unmanned dives in the sheltered waters off Nassau, the British and French thought it would be cheaper and more sensible to hire a local vessel suitable for the job instead of bringing one

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out from Europe. I was working with a salvage firm in Havana at the time and they had a ship with a heavy crane and boom right aft. It was ideal for the job. I was aboard it, but I didn't work on the bathyscaphe itself." I smiled faintly. "I was only aboard the salvage ship for a week or so. They got wind that I was there, I knew they were after me, and I had to leave in a hurry."

"They?"

"What does it matter now?"

"True, true," Vyland smiled. "From what we know of your record it might have been any one of the police forces of half a dozen countries. Anyway, General, it explains one thing that had been worrying us—where we saw Talbot's face before."

General Ruthven said nothing. If ever I'd needed conviction that he was a tool, a pawn of Vyland's, I needed it no longer. He clearly wished to have no part whatever in what was going on.

I said, as if a great light had suddenly dawned upon me, "Have you—were *you* the people responsible for the loss of this bathyscaphe? My God, it *was* you! How in the—?"

"You didn't think we brought you here just to discuss the diagrammatic layout of this vessel?" Vyland permitted himself a small pleased smile. "Of course it was us. It was easy. The fools moored it on a wire hawser in ten fathoms of water. We unhitched it, substituted a frayed hawser so that they would think that it had broken its moorings and that the tide had carried it out to deep water, then we towed it away. It wasn't difficult. People do not expect to see a bathyscaphe being towed by a private yacht."

"A private yacht. You mean—?" I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickling, I'd almost made the blunder that would have finished everything. It had been on the tip of my tongue to say *Temptress*—but no one knew I'd ever heard that name, except Mary, who'd mentioned it. "The general's? He has one?"

"Larry and I certainly haven't one," he grinned. "Larry and I—" an offbeat phrase, but there was nothing in it for me, so I let it pass. "Of course it's the general's yacht."

I nodded. "And equally of course you have the bathyscaphe somewhere near here. Would you mind telling me what in the world you want a bathyscaphe for?"

"You'll have to know anyhow. We are—ah—treasure-hunting."

"Near here?"

"Very near."

"Then why haven't you recovered it?"

"How would *you* recover it, Talbot?"

"Diving for it, of course. Should be easy in those waters. We're close inshore. Hundred feet, one fifty?"

"The X 13 is standing in how much, General?"

"One thirty feet low tide," Ruthven said mechanically.

"What's the greatest depth at which you can expect divers to perform really useful work, Talbot?"

"Perhaps three hundred feet."

I thought a moment. "The deepest I know was by U.S.

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divers off Honolulu. Two seven five feet. U.S. Submarine *F* 4."

"You really are a specialist, aren't you, Talbot?"

"Every diver and salvage man worth his salt knows that."

"Two seven five feet, eh? Unfortunately, what we're after is in the bottom of a big hole, a deep chasm in the sea bed. The general's geologists were very interested indeed when we located this. So we use the bathyscaphe." Vyland smiled. "The valley in the sea floor is less than six hundred yards from here. We take with us grabs and hooks attached to wires on drums fastened to the outside of the scaphe, fix them on—you can do some very fancy work with those extension arms and grabs fitted in front—then come back here, unreeling the wire as we go. Then we haul the wire in from the X 13. As easy as that, eh? Clever, you would say?"

"Very." I didn't think it clever at all, I didn't think Vyland had even begun to appreciate the difficulties involved, the endless slow-motion try, try, try again frustration of underwater salvage, the scope of the initial preparation, the skill and experience of years required. "And where exactly is the scaphe?" I asked.

Vyland pointed at the semi-circular trunking. "That's one of the support legs of this rig—but it happens to be raised twenty feet above the sea bed. The bathyscaphe is moored below that."

"Moored below it?" I stared at him. "What do you mean? It's beneath the bottom of that leg? How did you—"

"Simple," he interrupted. "I am not, as you may have gathered, much of an engineer but I have an—ah—professional friend who is. Bryson devised the simple expedient of fitting a reinforced and completely waterproof steel floor of great strength across the bottom of this leg—about six feet from the bottom, actually—and letting into this a tapering steel cylinder about six feet long and not quite three in diameter, projecting downwards, open top and bottom, but the top capable of being sealed off flush with the waterproof floor by a screwed hatch. In a recession about two feet from the top of this cylinder is a reinforced rubber tube . . . You begin to see daylight, I think, Talbot?"

"I see daylight." They were an ingenious bunch, if nothing else. "Somehow—almost certainly at night—you got the rig's engineers to cooperate with you in the lowering of this leg—I suppose you told them the yarn about top secret research.

"You had the bathyscaphe on the surface, unbolted its bridge cover, lowered the leg slowly until this cylinder fitted over the bathyscaphe's entrance hatch, pumped this rubber ring full of compressed air to make a perfect seal, then lowered the leg into the water, pushing the bathyscaphe down before it while someone inside the bathyscaphe, probably your engineering friend, adjusted the hydrostatic valve for one of the adjacent flooding chambers enough to let it sink easily but not so much as to rob it of the slight positive buoyancy necessary to keep the top of the entrance chamber jammed into the cylinder at the foot of the leg.

"When you want to take off you just climb into the bathyscaphe

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seal both the cylinder and bathyscaphe hatches, have someone on the rig blow the air from the rubber seal gripping the entrance chamber of the bathyscaphe, flood your tanks to get enough negative buoyancy to drop clear of the leg, and there you are. Reverse process when you come back except that you'll need a suction pump to clear the water that's accumulated in the cylinder. Right?"

"In every detail." Vyland permitted himself one of his rare smiles. "Brilliant, you might call it?"

"No. The only brilliant thing was stealing the bathyscaphe. The rest is within the scope of any moderately competent underwater operator. Your engineer friend was no fool. A pity about him, wasn't it?"

"A pity?" Vyland was no longer smiling.

"Yes. He's dead, isn't he?"

The room became very still. After perhaps ten seconds Vyland said very quietly, "What did you say?"

"I said he was dead. When anyone in your employ dies suddenly, Vyland, I would say it was because he had outlived his usefulness. But with your treasure unrecovered, he obviously hadn't. There was an accident.

"At the best of times caisson work, or its equivalent, is only for fit young men. Your engineer friend was no longer a fit young man. And you had, of course, no recompressor. So he died."

"We're wasting time." I could see the relief on Vyland's face, for a moment there he'd suspected that I—and possibly others as well—knew too much about the happenings on the X 13. But he was satisfied now—and very relieved. But I wasn't interested in his expression, only in the general's.

General Ruthven was regarding me in a very peculiar fashion indeed: there was puzzlement in his face, some thought that was troubling him, but worse than that there was the beginning of the first faint incredulous stirrings of understanding. I didn't like that, I didn't like it at all.

But I wasn't going to give Vyland time to look at and read the expression on the general's face—he might be smart enough for that. I said, "So your engineer is dead and now you need a driver, shall we say, for your bathyscaphe?"

"Wrong. We know how to operate it ourselves. From an office in Nassau we had obtained a complete set of maintenance and operation instructions in both French and English."

"Indeed? This is most interesting." I sat down on a bench without as much as a by-your-leave and lit a cigarette. Some such gesture would be expected from me. "Then what precisely do you want with me?"

For the first time in our brief acquaintance Vyland lookec embarrassed. "We can't get the damned engines to start."

"Well, well, well," I murmured. "How most inconvenient But surely they're listed in the maintenance instructions?"

"They are." The smooth polished veneer was showing a

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distinct crack and his voice was almost a snarl. "They're coded for a key. We haven't got a key."

"Wonderful, just wonderful." I rose leisurely to my feet and stood in front of Vyland. "Without me you're lost, is that it?"

He made no answer.

"Then I have my price, Vyland. A guarantee of my life." This angle didn't worry me at all but I knew I had to make the play or he'd have been as suspicious as hell. "What guarantee do you offer, Vyland?"

"I'll guarantee it, Talbot," General Ruthven said quietly. "I know who you are. I know you're a killer. But I won't have even a killer murdered out of hand. If anything happens to you I'll talk, regardless of the consequences. Vyland is first and foremost a businessman. Killing you wouldn't even begin to be compensation for the millions he'd lose. You need have no fear."

Millions. It was the first time there had been any mention of the amounts involved. Millions. And I was to get it for them.

"Thanks, General, that puts you on the side of the angels," I murmured. I stubbed out my cigarette, turned and smiled at Vyland. "Bring along the bag of tools, friend, and we'll go and have a look at your new toy."

It isn't the fashion to design tombs in the form of two hundred foot high metal cylinders, but if it were, that pillar on the X 13

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would have been a sensation. As a tomb, I mean. It had everything. It was cold and dank and dark, the gloom not so much relieved as accentuated by three tiny glow-worms of light at top, middle, and bottom.

The only connection between top and bottom lay in a succession of iron ladders welded on to the riveted sides of the pillar. There were twelve of those ladders, each with fifteen rungs, and not one break or resting place between top and bottom. What with the weight of a heavy circuit-testing bridge megger hanging down my back and the fact that the rungs were so wet and slippery that I had to grip them with considerable force to keep myself from falling off the ladder, the strain on forearm and shoulder muscles was severe; twice that distance and I wouldn't have made it.

Two men bent down and unscrewed the hatch. I peered down the narrow steel cylinder that led to the steel cabin beneath the bathyscaphe.

Then I glanced at my watch. "Twenty to eleven. It'll take me three hours to find out what's wrong. At least. I'll have a break at two. I'll knock on the hatch so that you can let me out."

"No need." Vyland wasn't happy, but as long as he couldn't put his finger on any possibility of treachery he wasn't going to deny me—he wasn't in any position to. "There's a microphone in the cabin, with its extension cable wound round a drum on the outside and a lead through a gland in the side of the leg that's carried up to that room where we were. There's a button call-up. Let us know when you're ready."

I nodded and started down the rungs welded into the side of the cylinder, unscrewed the upper hatch of the bathyscaphe's flooding and entrance chamber, managed to wriggle down past it—the downward projecting cylinder which encompassed the top of the entrance chamber was only a few inches wider and didn't give enough room to open the hatch fully—felt for the rungs below, pulled down the hatch, clamped it shut and then worked my way down the constricting narrowness of that chamber to the cabin below. I opened the heavy steel door to the cabin, wriggled through the tiny entrance, then closed and locked the door behind me.

Nothing had changed, it was as I had remembered it. The cabin was considerably bigger than that of the earlier F.R.N.S. from which it had been developed, and slightly oval in shape instead of round: but what was lost in structural power was more than compensated for in the scope and ease of movement inside, and as it was only intended for salvage operations up to about two thousand five hundred feet, the relative loss in strength was unimportant. There were three windows, one set in the floor, cone-shaped inwards as was the entrance door, so that sea pressure only tightened them in their seats: they looked fragile, those windows, but I knew that the specially constructed glass in the largest of them—and that was no more than a foot in its external diameter—could take tremendous pressure.

The cabin itself was a masterpiece of design. One wall—if

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approximately one-sixth of the surface area of the inside of a sphere could be called a wall—was covered with instruments, dials, fuse-boxes, switchboards and a variety of scientific equipment which we would not be called upon to use: set to one side were the controls for engine starting, engine speed, advance and reverse, for the searchlights, remote-controlled grabs, the dangling guide-rope which could hold the bathyscaphe stable near the bottom by resting part of its length on the sea bed and so relieving the scaphe of that tiny percentage of weight which was sufficient to hold it in perfect equilibrium; and finally, there were the fine adjustments for the device for absorbing exhaled carbon dioxide and regenerating oxygen.

One control there was that I hadn't seen before, and it puzzled me for some time. It was a rheostat with advance and retard positions graded on either side of the central knob and below this was the brass legend *Tow-rope control.* I had no idea what this could be for, but after a couple of minutes I could make a pretty sure guess. Vyland—or, rather, Bryson on Vyland's orders—must have fitted a power-operated drum to the top, and almost certainly the rear, of the bathyscaphe, the wire of which would have been attached, before the leg had been lowered into the water, to some heavy bolt or ring secured near the base of the leg. The idea, I now saw, was to overcome the very tricky navigational problem of finding their way back to the leg.

I switched on a searchlight, adjusted the beam, and stared down through the window at my feet. The deep circular ring in the ocean floor where the leg had originally been bedded was still there, a trench over a foot in depth: with that to guide, re-engaging the top of the entrance chamber in the cylinder inside the leg shouldn't be too difficult.

In the next five minutes or so I tested every item of equipment inside that cabin except the engine controls—should I have been able to start them up anyone still waiting on the bottom floor of that leg would have been sure to feel the vibration.

After that I unscrewed the cover of the largest of the circuit boxes, removed almost twenty coloured wires from their sockets and let them hang down in the wildest confusion and disorder. I attached a lead from the megger to one of those wires, opened the covers of another two circuit and fuseboxes and emptied most of my tools on to the small workbench beneath. The impression of honest toil was highly convincing.

So small was the floor of that steel cabin that there was no room for me to stretch out my length on the narrow mesh duckboard but I didn't care. I hadn't slept at all the previous night and I'd been through a great deal in the past twelve hours. I'd sleep all right.

I slept. My last impression before drifting off was that the wind and the seas must be really acting up. At depths of a hundred feet or over, wave-motion is rarely or never felt: but the rocking of that bathyscaphe was unmistakable, though very gentle indeed. It rocked me to sleep . . .

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My watch said half past two when I awoke. For me, this was most unusual. I'd normally the ability to set a mental alarm clock and wake up almost to the pre-selected moment. This time I'd slipped, but I was hardly surprised. My head ached fiercely, the air in that tiny cabin was foul. It was my own fault, I'd been careless. I reached for the switch controlling the carbon dioxide absorption and turned it up to maximum. After five minutes, when my head began to clear, I switched on the microphone and asked for someone to loosen the hatch-cover set into the floor of the leg. A man whom Vyland called Cibatti came down and let me out and three minutes later I was up again in that little steel room.

" Late, aren't you? " Vyland snapped. He and Royale—the helicopter must have made the double trip safely—were the only people there, apart from Cibatti who had just closed the trunking door behind me.

" You want the damn thing to go some time, don't you? " I said irritably. " I'm not in this for the fun of the thing, Vyland."

" That's so." The top executive criminal, he wasn't going to antagonise anyone unnecessarily. He peered closely at me. " Anything the matter with you? "

" Working for four hours on end in a cramped coffin is the matter with me," I said sourly. " That and the fact that the air purifier was maladjusted. But it's O.K. now."

" Progress? "

" Damn little." I lifted my hand as the eyebrow went up and the face began to darken in a scowl. " It's not for want of trying. I've tested every single contact and circuit. It's only in the past twenty minutes that I began to find out what's the matter."

" Well, what *was* the matter with it? "

" Your late engineer friend Bryson was the matter with it, that's what." I looked at him speculatively. " He'd fixed it so that he'd get a nice little posthumous revenge, or he hated you so much that if he had to go along he was determined that he was going to take you with him. Out of this world, I mean. Your friend has made a very clever little fix indeed, only he hadn't quite time to finish it—which is why the engines are still out of commission. He'd fixed it so that the bathyscaphe would have operated perfectly, would have gone backwards and forwards, up and down, anything you liked—until you had taken it down to a depth of just over three hundred feet. Then certain hydrostatic cut-outs would come into operation. A beautiful job." I wasn't gambling much, their ignorance of those matters was profound.

" And then what? " Vyland asked tightly.

" Then nothing. The bathyscaphe would never have been able to get above three hundred feet again. When either the batteries had been exhausted or the oxygen regenerating unit had failed, as it would have to in a few hours—well, you'd have died of suffocation." I looked at him consideringly. " After, that is, you had screamed your way into madness."

Vyland turned white and to conceal his agitation fumbled a packet

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of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit a cigarette with hands whose tremor he could not conceal. Royale, sitting on the table, just smiled his little secret smile and went on unconcernedly swinging his foot. That didn't make Royale any braver than Vyland, maybe it only meant he was less imaginative.

" Neat, eh? " Vyland said harshly. He had regained a measure of composure.

" It wasn't bad," I admitted. " At least I sympathise with his outlook, the object he had in mind."

" Funny. Very funny indeed." There were times when Vyland forgot that the well-bred business tycoon never snarls. He looked at me with sudden speculation in his eyes. " You wouldn't be thinking along the same lines yourself, Talbot? "

" It's an attractive idea," I grinned at him, " but you insult my intelligence. Now that I'm going to live I have a different outlook on things. The sooner this business is over, the sooner I'll be away from you and your cosy little pals. And then, I think, I could put the touch on the general for a few thousand. I hardly think he would like it known that he had been aiding and abetting criminal activities on a grand scale."

Apparently some things were still capable of surprising Vyland.

" You're as bad as any of us, Talbot."

" I never said I wasn't," I said indifferently. " These are hard times, Vyland. A man must live. And I'm in a hurry. That's why I suggest I come along. Salvage is no job for amateurs. Believe me, Vyland, I know, and it's not. You're amateurs. I'm an expert. It's the one thing I'm really good at. So I come, eh? "

Vyland looked at me long and consideringly, then he said softly, " I just wouldn't dream of going along without you, Talbot."

He turned, opened the door and gestured to me to precede him. He and Royale came out behind me and as we walked along the passage we could hear Cibatti slamming home a heavy bolt and turning a key in the lock. Which made it as safe as the Bank of England, except for one thing: in the Bank of England a code knock does not automatically open the door to the vaults. But it opened doors here, and I had remembered it: and even had I forgotten it, it would have come back there and then for Vyland was using it again on a door about fifteen yards along the passage.

The door was opened by Cibatti's opposite number. The compartment beyond wasn't as bleakly furnished as the one we had just left. It had a padded bench along one wall and on this the general and Mary were sitting.

The general was his usual erect, impassive self, but there were dark half moons under his eyes that had not been there a couple of days ago. His daughter's eyes, too, were smudged with blue, her face was pale; the droop of her slender shoulders, slight though it was, was there for all to see. There was nothing I would have liked better than to put an arm round those self-same shoulders, but the time and the place were wrong, the reaction anyway unpredictable.

Kennerley was sitting very straight on a wooden chair in a

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corner; someone had taken his gun from him and there was not even a suspicion of a bulge to mar the smooth line of his uniform. Larry, his big pistol out, his eyes twitching away as feverishly as ever, was pacing up and down, doing his big watchdog act.

As the door closed behind us, Mary Ruthven rose to her feet. There was an angry glint in her eye. She gestured towards Larry without looking at him.

" Is all this really necessary, Mr. Vyland? " she asked coldly. " Am I to assume that we have now arrived at the stage of being treated like criminals—like criminals under an armed guard? "

" You don't want to pay any attention to our little pal here," I put in soothingly. " The heater in his hand doesn't mean a thing. All those snow-birds are as jittery and nervous as this, just looking at the gun gives him confidence: his next shot's overdue, but when he gets it he'll be ten feet tall."

Larry took a couple of quick steps forward. His eyes were glazed. His breath was a harsh and hissing half whistle through bared and clenched teeth. " I told you, Talbot," he whispered. " I told you not to ride me any more. That's the last time—"

To get to the other side of the rig we had to cross the hundred foot width of the well-deck. I stood on one side to let all the others except Royale precede me, not so much out of courtesy as to ensure that Larry didn't shoot me in the back. It was the longest, wettest, and windiest hundred feet that I'd ever walked.

At half past two in the afternoon it was as dark as twilight and out of the great black-wall of cumulo-nimbus that all but surrounded us the wind flung itself upon the X 13 as if it were going to uproot it from its thirteen-leg foundation, topple it and drown it in the depths of the sea. The great wind whistled and shrieked its falsetto way through the hundreds of steel girders that went to make up the towering structure of the drilling derrick. We had to lean at an angle of almost forty-five degrees against the wind to keep our balance and at the same time hang on grimly to one of the lifelines.

Mary led the way across this exposed storm-filled working platform, and right behind her came Kennerley, one hand sliding along the wire, his free arm tightly round the girl in front. I came close up to him, actually treading on his heels, put my head close to his and shouted above the storm, " Any word come through yet? "

He was smart, all right, this chauffeur. He neither broke step nor turned round, but merely shook his head slightly.

" Damn! " This was awkward. " Have you phoned? "

Again the shake of the head. An impatient shake, this time, it looked like, and when I thought about it I couldn't blame him. Much chance he'd had of either hearing or finding out anything with Larry dancing around flourishing his pistol.

" I've got to talk to you, Kennerley," I shouted.

He heard me this time too; the nod was almost imperceptible.

We passed through a heavy clipped door and found ourselves in another world: this side resembled a sumptuous hotel.

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Instead of bleak steel bulkheads there was some form of panelling painted in pleasing pastel shades. The floor was sheathed in deep sound-absorbing rubber. Instead of harsh unshaded lighting falling from occasional overhead lamps, there was a warm diffused glow from concealed strip lighting.

But what pleased me more than all those evidences of comfort was the fact that there were concealed loudspeakers at intervals along the passage. These were playing music, soft music, but perhaps loud enough for my purpose. When the last of us had passed through the doorway, Kennerley turned to Royale.

"Where are we going, sir?" The perfect chauffeur to the end. Anyone who could call Royale "sir" deserved a medal.

"The general's state-room. Lead the way."

"I usually eat in the drillers' mess, sir," Kennerley said stiffly.

"Not today. Hurry up, now."

Kennerley took him at his word. Soon he had left most of them ten feet behind—all except me. And I knew I had very little time. I kept my voice low, head bent, and talked without looking at him. "Can we put a phone call through to land?"

"No. One of Vyland's men is with the switchboard operator."

"See the sheriff?"

"A deputy. He got the message."

"How are they going to let us know if they had any success?"

"A message. To the general. Saying that you—or a man like you—had been arrested at Jacksonville, travelling north."

I should have loved to curse out loud but I contented myself with cursing inwardly. Vyland's creature supervising the operator would know the message to be false and wouldn't bother passing it on, except perhaps hours later, by way of a joke: nor was there any certainty that even then the news would reach my ears. Everything, just everything could fail and men might die because I couldn't get the news I wanted.

The music suddenly stopped, but we were rounding a corner which cut us off momentarily from the others, and I took a long chance. "The short-wave radio operator—on constant duty?"

Kennerley hesitated. "Don't know. Call-up bell, I think."

I knew what he meant. Where a radio post can't be continuously manned, there is a device that triggers a distant alarm bell when a call comes through.

"Can you operate a short-wave transmitter?" I murmured.

He shook his head.

"You've got to help me. It's essential that—"

"Talbot!"

It was Royale's voice. He'd heard me, I was sure he'd heard me, and this was it; if he'd the slightest suspicion, then I knew Kennerley and I had exchanged our last words and that I was through. I slowed down gradually, looked round mildly and inquiringly. Royale was about eight feet behind, no signs of suspicion or hostility in his face. But then there never were. "Wait here," he said curtly. He moved ahead of us, opened a door, peered

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in, had a good look round, then beckoned. "All right. In."

We went in. The room was big, over twenty feet long, and luxuriously furnished. The dining-room of the suite—internal doors opened off right- and left-hand walls—where the general roughed it when he came out to the oil-rig.

Vyland was there, waiting for us.

"Close the door," he said to Larry, then turned to me and nodded towards a curtained alcove. "You eat there, Talbot."

"Sure," I agreed. "The hired help. I eat in the kitchen."

"You eat there for the same reason that you saw no one on your way through the corridors coming here. Think we want the drilling-rig crew running around shouting that they've just seen Talbot, the wanted murderer? Don't forget they have radios here and the chopper delivers papers every day . . . "

I went quickly to my seat at the tiny table behind the curtain and sat down. I felt shaken. My attention was so taken up with immediate problems that I had forgotten that I was playing the part of a murderer. Had I been a genuine and wanted killer, I'd have kept my face hidden, walked in the middle of the group . . .

The outside door opened and someone, a steward, I assumed, entered. Once again it was the general who was the host: the general's ability to switch roles, his unfailing command of himself in all circumstances, impressed me more every time I noticed it.

The general finished giving his orders for lunch, the door closed behind the departing steward, and for perhaps a minute there was complete silence. Then someone rose to his feet and crossed the room and the next I heard was the sound of bottles and glasses clinking. Trifles like murder and forcible coercion and underwater recovery of millions weren't going to get in the way of southern hospitality. I would have taken long odds that the general himself was barman, and I was right: I would have taken even longer odds that he would pass up Talbot the murderer, and I was wrong.

The alcove curtain was pushed back and the general himself set down a glass before me: he remained bent over my tiny table for a couple of seconds, and the look he gave me wasn't the look you give a known murderer who has at one time kidnapped your daughter and threatened her with death. It was a long, slow, considering, speculative look: and then incredibly, but unmistakably, the corner of his mouth twitched in a smile and his eye closed in a wink. Next moment he was gone, the curtain falling into place.

I hadn't imagined it, I knew I hadn't imagined it. The general was on to me. How much he was on to me I couldn't guess. One thing I was sure of, he hadn't learnt from his daughter—I'd impressed her enough with the necessity for complete secrecy.

There was a rumble of conversation in the room. "It's damnably insulting and utterly ridiculous," the general was saying in a voice that I'd never heard before. A dry, icy voice. "This gun-waving, this guarding has got to stop. I insist on it, Vyland. Good God, man, it's utterly unnecessary. Look at the weather—no one can move from here in the next twelve hours at least.

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We're not in the position to make any trouble—and you know I'm the last man in the world to want to. I can vouch personally for my daughter and Kennerley."

The general was sharp, sharp as a needle, sharper than either Vyland or Royale. What he was really after was the power of freedom of movement—possibly for himself, even more possibly for his chauffeur. And, what was more, he was getting it. Vyland was agreeing, with the reservation that when he and Royale went in the bathyscaphe the general, his chauffeur, and Mary should remain in the room above the pillar with the rest of Vyland's men.

A steward—or stewards—set down covers, made to serve but were told by the general to go. As the door closed he said, "Mary, I wonder if you would take something to Talbot?"

There came the soft sound of the rubbing of chair legs on the carpet, then Kennerley's voice: "If I might be permitted, sir?"

"Thank you, Kennerley. Just a minute while my daughter serves it out." By and by the curtain was pushed to one side and Kennerley carefully laid a plate in front of me. Beside the plate he laid a small blue leather-covered book, straightened, looked at me expressionlessly, and left.

He was gone before I had realised the significance of what he had done. He knew very well that whatever concessions in freedom of movement the general had gained did not apply to me; I was going to be under eye and gun for sixty seconds every minute, sixty minutes every hour, and that our last chance for talking was gone. But not our last chance for communication, not with that little book lying around.

It wasn't strictly a book, it was that cross between a diary and an account book, with a tiny pencil stuck in the loop of leather, which nearly all chauffeurs carry. What interested me was the empty spaces in the diary pages and the little blue pencil.

With one eye on the book and one on the curtain and both ears attuned to the voices and sounds beyond that curtain, I tried to set down in the briefest time and the shortest compass everything I wanted to tell Kennerley. There was still a great deal left to chance but it was the best I could do.

Perhaps ten minutes after I had finished writing Kennerley brought me in a cup of coffee. The book was nowhere to be seen, but he didn't hesitate, his hand went straight under the crumpled napkin in front of me, closed over the little book, and slid it smoothly inside his tunic. I was beginning to have a great deal of confidence in Simon Kennerley.

Five minutes later Vyland and Royale marched me back to the other side of the rig.

At twenty past three I dropped once more down into the bathyscaphe and pulled the hatch cover tight behind me.

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★ ***The last part of Fear is the Key by Alistair MacLean appears in next month's Argosy on sale November 10***

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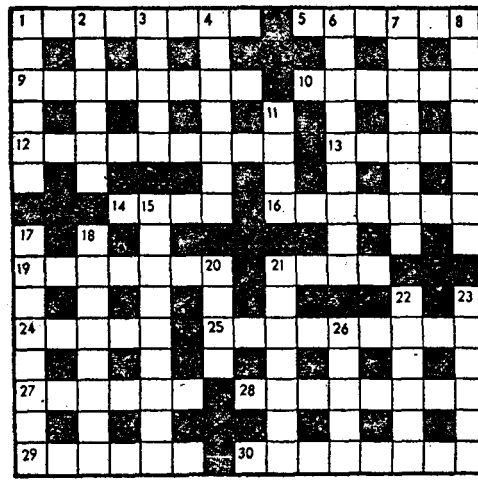
ARGOSY CROSSWORD

Solution on page 105



ACROSS

1 Houdini ? Not quite ! (8).

5 Frolic sounds a bit risky (6).

9 In reduced circumstances (8).

10 Heathen begins to be profitable (6).

12 Purser is more certain in the end (9).

13 Prize for a minor, it seems (5).

14 Contrary miss (4).

16 Scolds used to get it (7).

19 Is he his parents' pride ? Well, part of it (4, 3).

21 Palindromic document (4).

24 Disney's little dear ! (5).

25 Magnet sounds as if it has masonic connections (9).

27 Daedalus and Son (6).

28 Little agent starts the retaliation (8).

29 It may be real or industrial (6).

30 Basic chemicals of soot pies (8).

DOWN

1 Substitute rested inside (6).

2 Bow Bells, for instance (6).

3 Back Sam up to see the animals (5).

4 Combined operations (7).

6 's no slip ? On the contrary ! (9).

7 Joseph's brother (8).

8 Maybe they require the help of a stylist (4, 4).

11 Alternative for " X marks the spot " (4).

15 Man with a plan (9).

17 Prehistoric courtship ? No, a social acquaintance (4-4).

18 Steele decay ? Nonsense ! (5-3).

20 R.S.M.'s delight ! (4).

21 They're usually artful (7).

22 Hammer and tongues (6).

23 Just the Roman goddess to inform us (6).

26 Mackerel bait (5).

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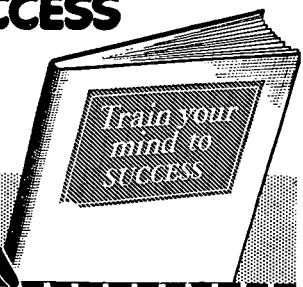

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